ALL STORIES NEW...NO REPRINTS

RANCH ROMANCES

5c

A THRILLING PUBLICATION
THIRD APRIL NUMBER

FEATURING

THE ECHO OF RIFLES
by Ray G. Ellis

FURY AT CARBINE CREEK
by John Jakes

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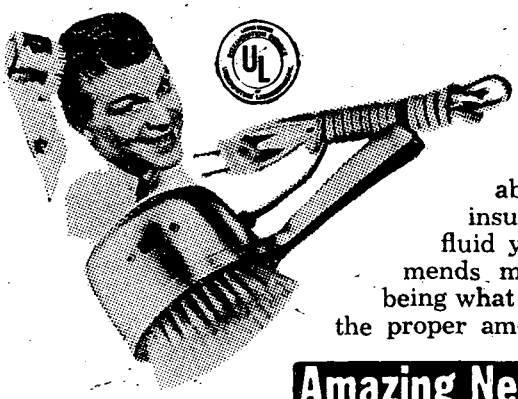
New Invention Shows You How You May SAVE YOUR HAIR



FICTION AND FACT:

First, let's separate fiction from facts. If your hair roots are dead, there's nothing in this world you can do about it. But if your roots still have life in them, you may be able to do something about it. If you are losing your hair due to insufficient circulation of the blood and tissue fluid you can be helped. Medical science recommends massage and brushing, but human nature being what it is, we never get around to giving ourselves the proper amount of hair-saving massage and brushing.

Amazing New Invention Does the Work!

Some doctors now believe that nervous tension may be a factor in falling hair and baldness. Emotional tension may produce circulatory impairment to the scalp, which tends to interfere with nutrition of the hair roots. Hair thins out and bald spots appear.

VIBRA BRUSH helps relieve this muscular tension and relaxes you as though by magic! Run VIBRA BRUSH over scalp, starting from forehead and working slowly to back of head. Almost at once, the gentle stimulation and vibration loosens tenseness! The scalp relaxes, relaxation spreads to the facial muscles and then even to the rest of the body. With relaxation circulation improves, blood flows to the hair roots, and fatigue will often be relieved. With improved circulation nutrition is brought to the hair roots more freely and your hair will be greatly benefited!

As though by magic, VIBRA BRUSH helps increase the circulation of blood and tissue fluid. VIBRA BRUSH will help release the natural oils in your scalp. Loose dandruff and accumulated dirt are easily removed. You feel clean and invigorated. VIBRA BRUSH massages and stimulates the Natural way without harsh rubbing that may damage hair and irritate scalp.

Try VIBRA BRUSH at our risk for 2 weeks. If you don't say it's the greatest blessing ever designed for the hair, if it doesn't help you, send the brush right back for full and prompt refund—you lose nothing! VIBRA BRUSH comes complete to you with 8-ft. cord, plug, on-off switch. Made of durable anodized Aluminum. Bristle head is instantly detachable for rinsing. Only $9.95 postpaid. If ordering C.O.D., send $1 pay balance plus postage on arrival.

VIBRA BRUSH CORP., Dept. A-157
42 Broadway, New York City 4, N. Y.

Please send me the Underwriters Laboratory Approved VIBRA BRUSH for 10 days trial period. I enclose $1, upon arrival I will pay postman only $8.95 plus postage and handling. If not delighted I may return VIBRA BRUSH within 10 days for prompt refund of full purchase price.

☐ I enclose $12.98. Send DeLuxe Model.

Name.....

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Bass Fishermen will Say I'm Crazy . . .

until they try my method!

But, after an honest trial, if you're at all like the other men to whom I've told my strange plan, you'll guard it with your last breath.

Don't jump at conclusions. I'm not a manufacturer of any fancy new lure. I have no reels or lines to sell. I'm a professional man and make a good living in my profession. But my all-absorbing hobby is fishing. And, quite by accident, I've discovered how to go to waters that everyone else says are fished out and come in with a limit catch of the biggest bass that you ever saw. The savage old bass that got so big, because they were "wise" to every ordinary way of fishing.

This METHOD is NOT spinning, trolling, casting, fly fishing, trot line fishing, set line fishing, hand line fishing, live bait fishing, jugging, netting, trapping, seining, and does not even faintly resemble any of these standard methods of fishing. No live bait or prepared bait is used. You can carry all of the equipment you need in one hand.

The whole method can be learned in twenty minutes—twenty minutes of fascinating reading. All the extra equipment you need, you can buy locally at a cost of less than a dollar. Yet with it, you can come in after an hour or two of the greatest excitement of your life, with a stringer full. Not one or two miserable 12 or 14 inch over-sized keepers—but five or six real beauties with real poundage behind them. The kind that don't need a word of explanation of the professional skill of the man who caught them. Absolutely legal, too—in every state.

This amazing method was developed by a little group of professional fishermen. Though they are public guides, they rarely divulge their method to their patrons. They use it only when fishing for their own tables. It is probable that no man on your waters has ever **seen it,** ever **heard of it,** or ever **used it.** And when you have given it the first trial, you will be as closed-mouthed as a man who has suddenly discovered a gold mine. Because with this method you can fish within a hundred feet of the best fishermen in the county and pull in ferocious big ones while they come home empty handed. No special skill is required. The method is just as deadly in the hands of a novice as in the hands of an old timer. My method will be disclosed only to those few men in each area who will give me their word of honor not to give the method to anyone else.

Send me your name. Let me tell you how you can try out this deadly method of bringing in big bass from your "fished out" waters. Let me tell you why I let you try out my unusual method for the whole fishing season without risking a penny of your money. Send your name for details of my money-back trial offer. There is no charge for this information, now or at any other time. Just your name is all I need. But I guarantee that the information I send you will make you a complete skeptic—until you decide to try my method! And then, your own catches will fill you with disbelief. Send your name, today. This will be fun.

ERIC K. FARE, Libertyville 8, Illinois

ERIC K. FARE, Libertyville 8, Illinois

Dear Mr. Fare: Send me complete information without any charge and without the slightest obligation. Tell me how I can learn your method of catching big bass from "fished out" waters, even when the old timers are reporting "No Luck."

Name .....

Address .....

City..... Zone... State.....

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32nd Year
OF PUBLICATION

THIRD
APRIL NUMBER

April 20, 1956
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RANCH ROMANCES

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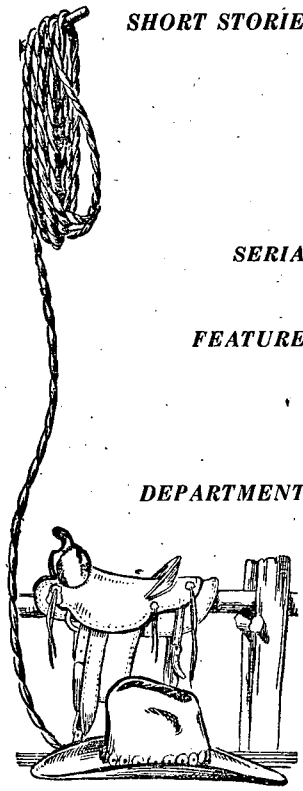

HELEN TONO
Editor

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THOUGHTS HAVE WINGS

You Can Influence Others With Your Thinking!

TRY IT SOME TIME. Concentrate intently upon another person seated in a room with you, without his noticing it. Observe him gradually become restless and finally turn and look in your direction. Simple—yet it is a *positive demonstration* that thought generates a mental energy which can be projected from your mind to the consciousness of another. Do you realize how much of your success and happiness in life depend upon your influencing others? Is it not important to you to have others understand your point of view—to be receptive to your proposals?

Demonstrable Facts

How many times have you wished there were some way you could impress another favorably—*get across to him or her your ideas*? That thoughts can be transmitted, received, and understood by others is now scientifically demonstrable. The tales of miraculous accomplishments of mind by the ancients are now known to be fact—*not* fable. The method whereby these things can be *intentionally*, not accidentally, accomplished has been a secret long cherished by the Rosicrucians—one of the schools of ancient wisdom existing throughout the world. To thousands everywhere, for centuries, the Rosicrucians have privately taught this nearly-lost art of the practical use of mind power.

This Free Book Points Out the Way

The Rosicrucians (not a religious organization) invite you to explore the powers of your mind. Their sensible, simple suggestions have caused intelligent men and women to soar to new heights of accomplishment. *They will show you* how to use your natural forces and talents to do things you now think are beyond your ability. *Use the coupon below* and send for a copy of the fascinating sealed *free* book, "The Mastery of Life," which explains how you may receive this unique wisdom and benefit by its application to your daily affairs.

The ROSICRUCIANS
(AMORC)

Scribe S.Y.Z., The Rosicrucians, AMORC,
Rosicrucian Park, San Jose, California.

Kindly send me a free copy of the book, "The Mastery of Life." I am interested in learning how I may receive instructions about the full use of my natural powers.

Name.....

Address.....State.....

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Away From Home

Dear Editor:

I am a lonely GI stationed on Guam, without any mail coming to me when mail call comes around. I would like to write to both men and women. My age is 43, and I stand 6' tall and weigh 202 lbs. My hair is brown and my eyes are blue. I'm willing to exchange snapshots with anyone who would like to.

S/SGT. PERCY H. SCROGGINS, JR. 6959115
3760th Air Police Sqdn.
APO 334, San Francisco, California

From the West Coast

Dear Editor:

I live in the quaint old town of Santa Barbara and would be glad to exchange picture postcards with anyone who would be interested. I have blue eyes and brown hair. My likes include the out-of-doors, and dancing. Will be looking forward to hearing from men and women from 18 to 50.

MARY NELLE MASON
308 E. Anapamu St.
Santa Barbara, California

The Bashful Type

Dear Editor:

I have been reading RANCH ROMANCES for over ten years, and thought I would try my luck to get into the pen-pal page. I'm a guy of 31, with brown hair and eyes; stand 5' 6" tall, and weigh 150 lbs. I like animals and outdoor sports. I'm lonely and bashful, and a long way from home.

JOSEPH MOBY II
1307 E. Saginaw
Lansing 6, Michigan

On the Side of the Law

Dear Editor:

I am 24 years old, 6'1" tall, and weigh 172 lbs. I've been a police officer, a Golden Gloves boxer, and am now working in the drug line and doing police work at night. I love hunting and other sports. Promise to answer all letters.

BILLY J. ANDERSON
3304 Manor Way
Dallas, Texas

From the Tall Country

Dear Editor:

I am a freshman in high school, 14 years old, 5'1½" tall, weighing 110 lbs. and have blond hair and brown eyes. I live in the timberland, where my father works. I love all kinds of sports, and I play a trumpet. Would like to hear from boys and girls between the ages of 12 and 16.

SHARON KING
Woody Creek, Colorado

Regular Reader

Dear Editor:

I want to congratulate you on your splendid magazine, which I read every month. I hope there is room for my letter, as I would like to have pen friends from all over. I am 17 years old, stand 6' tall, and have dark brown hair and gray-green eyes. My hobbies are swimming, reading, and writing letters.

MICHAEL GUY
Tiverton
Strathelyde
St. Michael
Barbados, B.W.I.

EDITOR'S NOTE: For 31 years Our Air Mail has been linking the readers of Ranch Romances. You may write directly to anyone whose letter is published, if you uphold the wholesome spirit of Ranch Romances.

Our Air Mail is intended for those who really want correspondents. Be sure to sign your own name. Address letters for publication to Our Air Mail, Ranch Romances, 10 East 40th Street, New York 16, N. Y.

Bachelor Man

Dear Editor:

I am a bachelor of 34, and would like very much to hear from some of the other RANCH ROMANCES readers. My height is 5'7", and I have brown hair and eyes. Would prefer to hear from the opposite sex, between the ages of 23 and 33, but will answer all letters.

GEORGE J. BAKER
P. O. Box 377
Johnstown, New York

Stamp Collector

Dear Editor:

Through the years I have enjoyed reading RANCH ROMANCES very much. I am an Airman and have been in many foreign countries. My hobbies are stamp collecting and reading. I would like to correspond with stamp collectors, and to trade stamps.

T/SGT. JAMES M. JOHNSON
3615th Installation Sq.
Craig Air Force Base, Alabama

Korean Vet

Dear Editor:

Came across your magazine and was greatly interested in your pen-pal column. Please find room there for a lonely disabled Korean Veteran. I am 21 years old, with brown hair and eyes, am 5'10½" tall, and weigh 163 lbs. I like all sports, and music. My hobbies are reading and letter writing. I promise to answer every letter I receive.

BILLY J. WALLACE
Route #1
Corryton, Tennessee

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From Far Off Iran

Dear Editor:

I wonder if any of your girl readers would care to exchange letters with an Iranian boy? I have dark brown eyes and jet black hair, stand 5'8" tall, and weigh 160 lbs. My age is 19. My interests include traveling, reading, and stamp collecting, and I also like music and dancing. I am the chairman of the International Correspondence Committee of the Gaam Youth Cultural Center in Tehran. I am a student, and plan to complete my studies in the U.S.A.

MANSOOR FRASCION

Notary No. 55
Rue Bahar
Avenue Sa'adi,
Tehran, Iran.

Small Town Girls

Dear Editor:

We are three girls from a small town. Our ages are 14 and 15. We would like to write to guys and girls over 14. Most of all recreations, we like sports. We promise to exchange snapshots and to answer all letters.

LINDA OLSEN
DEANN JOHNSON
BONNIE SORENSON

Orid, Idaho

Mexican Student

Dear Editor:

I am a Mexican boy, studying at the Universidad de Nueve Leon. My age is 16, and I have dark brown eyes and hair, am 5'6" tall, and weigh 116 lbs. My hobbies are writing letters, collecting stamps, and participating in sports. I will answer all letters, and will write in either Spanish or English.

PEDRO MARTINEZ, JR.

Allende Ote. 737
Monterrey N.L.
Mexico

Neighbor From Mexico

Dear Editor:

I have been reading your nice magazine RANCH ROMANCES and wonder whether I can appear in your column. I am 25 years old, 5'5" tall, with black hair and eyes. Would like very much to receive letters in English, French or Spanish from blond or brunette ladies between the ages of 18 and 25.

HECTOR DE LA VEGA OLAV

Argentina 6F #11.
Mexico, D. J.

Davy Crockett's Town

Dear Editor:

I am a fellow of 26 with blue eyes and brown hair. I like music and play the guitar. I have written one song and had it recorded. I live in the hometown of Davy Crockett, and to those who write to me I will send a picture of the monument of Davy Crockett.

THOMAS BLAIR

213 Columbia Avenue
Lawrenceburg, Tennessee

Real Lonesome

Dear Editor:

I have been reading RANCH ROMANCES for about seven years and think it's wonderful. My age is 42, I'm 5'8" tall, weigh 165 lbs., and have black hair and brown eyes. Come on, girls, write to me as I am very lonesome.

CHARLES LARIS

1518 West 11th Street
Los Angeles 12, California

Small Town Gal

Dear Editor:

I am a small town girl living where there is very little chance of making new friends. I would love to hear from people around my age from all over the world. I am 17 years old, 5'4" tall, and have black curly hair and blue eyes. Let me hear from you.

CAROLE COLBY

P.O. Box 164
Issaquah, Washington

Country Gal

Dear Editor:

Hope I make your magazine this time. I am 16 years old and a junior at school. I have dark brown hair and eyes, am 4'11" tall, and weigh 115 lbs. My favorite hobby is writing—so come on, friends, drop me a line.

EVELYN JONES

Route 2 Box 105
Germantown, Maryland

Dairy Farmer

Dear Editor:

I am a dairy farmer living in the central part of Alabama. I'm 42 years old, stand 5'8" tall, weigh 140 lbs., and have brown hair and gray eyes. Horses are my hobby, and I own two of my own. Also enjoy top Western movies and Western and hillbilly music. So come on, ladies and gents, let me hear from you.

HENRY W. JINKMAN

Route 4, Box 260 J-2
Sylacauga, Alabama

Ohio Lass

Dear Editor:

Could a lonely gal from the Buckeye State get into your Air Mail column? I'm 16 years old, 5'1" tall, weigh 106 lbs., and have brown hair and blue eyes. I'll answer all letters, and will also exchange pictures.

HELEN VANDEMARK

Bainbridge, Ohio
Rout #1

Turkish Delight

Dear Editor:

I would like to correspond with American girls. I am 20 years old, with blond hair and light brown eyes. My interests include singing, playing the accordion and piano, collecting stamps, and football. Will answer all letters.

NEOMI BAYKOL

Boykol Bonmarsesi I
Malkara, Turkey

(Continued on page 113)

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ACT NOW!

GET 4 ISSUES OF RANCH ROMANCES FREE!

You can get what amounts to 4 issues of RANCH ROMANCES *free*...have more than 1800 pages of Western love and action delivered right to your home...by acting *now* on this Special Offer:

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Think of it! You pay the single copy price for twelve but you actually get *16* big issues of RANCH ROMANCES...page after page of...

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- ★ *Stranger-Than-Fiction True Adventures*
- ★ *Ranch Flicker Talk—by Robert Cummings*
- ★ *Personal Mail Columns...Advice on Love and Marriage*
- ★ *Western Crosswords...Cartoons...Verse...and much, much more!*

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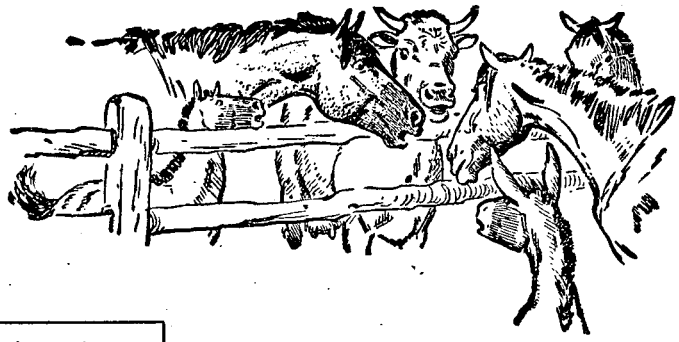
TRAIL DUST



PARDNERS! Here's an open invitation to you to cut sign on colorful happenings of today's West. Send clippings to us, and include the name and date of the paper where you found it. We'll send you one dollar per usable item; in case of duplicates, first come, first served!

WITH a whole rack of real guns to choose from, a Milwaukee, Wisc., thief who smashed in the window of a sporting goods store fooled himself by snatching the one gun that was only a wooden dummy, painted to resemble the real thing.

POLICE listened unsympathetically to a Clarksville, O., man's explanation that he set his house ablaze "to see if I had any friends who would help me put out the fire." He was jailed for drunkenness and starting a fire.

WHAT the superintendent of a Sheridan, Wyo., school asked for when he filled in a government surplus application was a walk-in freezer for the school cafeteria. What he got was a 1921 surplus fire engine.

HUNGRY ants in California's San Fernando Valley have been treating themselves to light lunches—traffic lights. They've caused 56 short circuits in six weeks while fattening up on the insulation in wire-connector boxes.

GROWING agitated when his car hit a bridge railing, a Dallas, Tex., driver shifted into reverse and backed halfway into a 10-foot ditch. Even more excited now, he opened the car door and jumped —into the ditch.

"SMART dog," said a Traverse City, Mich., man when he returned to his parked car and found that his dog had moved from the back to the front seat of the car, turned on the radio, and was listening quietly. But he had some more uncomplimentary things to say when he found that the dog had pushed down both inside door buttons, locking him out.

THERE'S a very appropriate sign over the door of the Jackson, Wyo., Elks lodge. It reads: "Welcome Elks"—and is located across the highway from the state elk refuge.

SHOWING off for visiting fire inspectors, a Dallas, Tex., school was holding a fire drill, when word came that the kitchen was ablaze. After the inspectors had put out the fire, one remarked, "It's the first time I've had a formal appointment for a job."

"WHEN I drink, everybody drinks," announced a Manitowoc, Wisc., youth as he stepped up to a local bar. Everybody drank, and the bartender tried to collect. "When I pay, everybody pays," the young man said. A free-for-all fight broke out, and the youth was carted off to jail.

THE fire chief of Baytown, Tex., was taken to a hospital recently for treatment of burns. He had backed against a hot stove.

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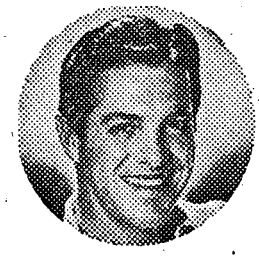
RANCH FLICKER TALK



by movie editor BOB CUMMINGS

This famous top-hand of stage, screen and TV corrals the best of the Westerns

Fury at Gunsight Pass

Planning a bank robbery means hard work for the thieves . . . and a lot of excitement for moviegoers who see Columbia's new Western

THE BEST-LAID plans of bank robbers are even more likely to go astray than the plans of mice and men—which, of course, is a lucky thing for honest folks who save their money. In a nutshell, that's the story of Columbia's *Fury at Gunsight Pass,* though it's a lot more complicated than that and much more exciting in action than in print.

David Brian and Neville Brand are the plotters of the robbery, and they have a gang of hardened outlaws to help them pull it off. Richard Long and Lisa Davis are the two who eventually foil the scheme with the help of just about all the people in the little frontier town of Gunsight Pass.

For the plan to work, everything depends upon cooperation among the outlaws. And that's the first thing that goes wrong. The idea is that David will get to town first, pick up a satchel he has left for safekeeping at the bank, force the banker to fill it with money, and by then Neville and his henchmen will arrive on the scene to cover David's getaway. But David plans a doublecross. He's going to pull the job off early and make off with the loot before Neville arrives in town.

So, for David's plan to work, everything depends upon timing. That's the second thing that goes wrong. The day of the holdup is Richard's and Lisa's wedding day, because the outlaws figure folks in town, including the sheriff, will be too busy with the festivities to worry about protecting their money in the bank. But the minister is fifteen minutes late for the wedding, so the bank is fifteen minutes late in reopening afterward, and David's skimpy margin of safety in getting away from the rest of the gang is cut down to a few seconds.

From then on things get even more complicated and exciting, as the chase leads through an undertaker's establishment and a stable, to a necktie party in the hills. I've told you a lot about *Fury at Gunsight Pass*—but you don't know the half of it. There are still plenty of surprises in store for you when you see the movie.

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Dick Long has had a slow but steady rise in films for the past eight years, except for two of them when he served with the Army. He finally reached star status in the thriller, *Cult of the Cobra*. He's starred for the second time in *Fury at Gunsight Pass*, and he thinks his part in it is the best one he's had.

Dick likes to play in Westerns and adventure movies because he thinks they're the kind of entertainment that takes people's minds off their troubles.

"People really go to the movies to escape from the problems of daily life," he said. "I think a good definition of 'actor' would be 'escape artist'."

Dick knows a lot about troubles. His own life has been darkened by the illness and death of his wife, Suzan Ball. His love for her was so great that he married her even knowing how short their life together might be. And the whole country has admired his loyalty and devotion to Suzan in her valiant battle against cancer.

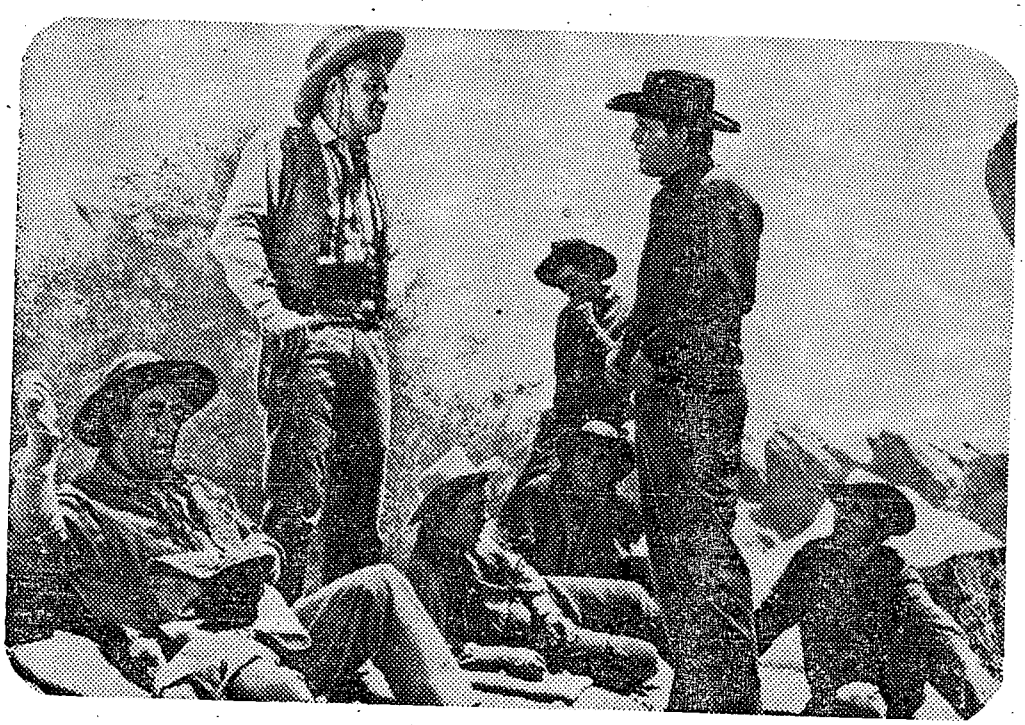
Lisa Davis's part came as a great surprise to her. "I've always been a Western fan," she told me, "but I never expected to play in one. After all, most studios don't cast a British song-and-dance girl as a Western heroine.

But Columbia did, so I tried to drop my accent and be as American as possible. It turned out to be great fun."

David was the only real old Western hand among the stars in *Fury at Gunsight Pass*. He's been in plenty of horse-operas, playing both heros and villains, jumping from one side of the law to the other with the greatest of ease.

He says he has a slight preference for badmen over good ones—before the cameras only, of course.

"Usually there's more action in a heavy part," he said. "You're sure to get mixed up in chases and fights as a badman. But if you're a hero, you're bound to have to do some talking to the heroine, and maybe even make polite love to her. Love scenes may look like nice work if you can get it, but believe me, they're the hardest things to play."



"Bank robbers" David Brian and Neville Brand plan their crime

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GAIL RUSSELL Comeback

RANCH FLICKER TALK

AN ACTRESS making a comeback usually has to worry about such things as a double chin or lines around the eyes. But Gail Russell, who is making her first movie since 1950, is still in her twenties; so she has no signs of age to conceal.

Her problem, she says, is strictly phychological. "I think it's harder to start over again," said Gail, "than to start for the first time. I became an actress so fast and so unexpectedly that I didn't have time to think about being scared. But I've had plenty of time in the last five years to worry about making a comeback."

She hadn't had even one day's training when she went before the cameras for the first time for Paramount back in 1942. A couple of her high school girl friends had raved to a movie scout about Gail's looks and personality, and before she knew it she'd been signed to a term contract.

Her first picture was *Henry Aldrich Gets Glamour,* and other pictures followed thick and fast. "I didn't fret about my career or about how good I was," Gail told me. "I just worked."

During those hectic years, Gail's steady date was Guy Madison. It was an off-again, on-again romance, which kept their fans breathless, until suddenly in 1949 Gail and Guy eloped.

"After that," said Gail, "I decided it was time to slow down for a while and take a look at my life. I made my last picture in 1950, planning to take a few months off and concentrate on my marriage. I never dreamed it would be five years before I went to work again."

During those years the Madison marriage was on-again, off-again, until it finally ended.

"Then I realized how much I missed making movies," Gail said, "and I wanted to get back to work. Once I would have jumped into anything that came along, but being away from the screen had made me cautious, and I kept waiting for the right picture."

Several things decided her to make *Seven Men From Now,* with Randolph Scott. For one thing, she loves Westerns; for another thing the movie was being produced by John Wayne, one of her favorite people since she appeared with him in *The Angel and the Badman.*

Archery is her favorite—in fact, her only—sport. She takes it so seriously that she uses a man-sized bow with a 46-pound pull, instead of a woman's 28-pounder.

Her only other hobby is art. She often makes quick, deft pencil sketches, and she loves to work in oils. During her retirement from the screen she thought she might become a commercial artist.

"And I find it comforting to think I have something to fall back on," she confessed, "in case this comeback doesn't succeed."

Nobody seems to be worried about Gail's comeback but Gail, however. As soon as the news got around that she was making another picture, her faithful fans began writing to her.

Gail loves her fans, of course—what movie star doesn't?—but she's a little afraid of them, especially in large numbers. Actually, she's a shy, reserved person, and strangers think she's cold and unfriendly.

"I can't help being stiff when people I don't know surround me to ask for my autograph," she said. "It's hard for me to believe anybody really wants it."

Gail can only take a few people at a time, maybe two or three to whom she can warm up gradually. Once she feels she's among friends, though, she's lively, warm and witty.

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Warners

Gail's nervous about her comeback, but happy to be acting again

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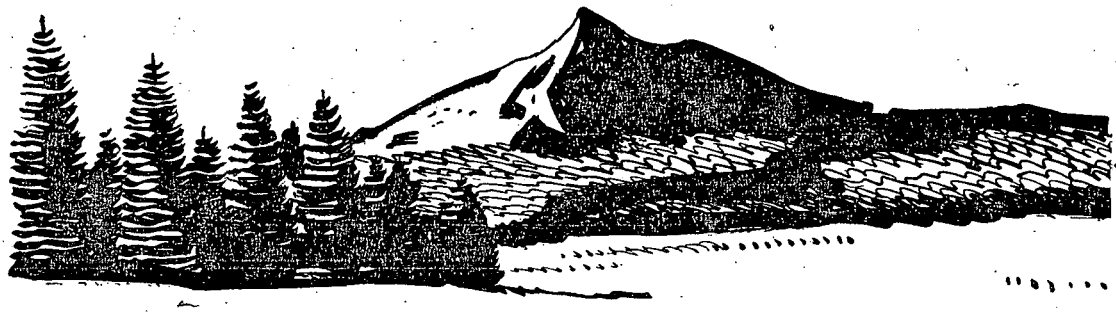

The Echo of Rifles

by RAY G. ELLIS

CHET BUTLER HAD KEPT the secret hidden for ten years, but now his brother's murder was forcing him to reopen old wounds. . . .

HE STUDIED the elk head over the mirror noting the dust that lay on the edges of the plaque and background and on the head itself. The antlers were magnificent, spreading outward and upward until they nearly touched the high ceiling.

In his hand, forgotten for the moment was an untasted glass of beer. The hand that gripped the glass was larger, calloused, strong. In fact, the man was large all over, filling out the faded denim shirt on his back until it was stretched nearly taut. He was thin hipped, but muscular thighs bulged in the worn flannel trousers.

His winter-sky colored eyes dropped to the glass in front of him and then lifted again. This time they looked at two heavy,

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rusty nails protruding from the wall below the elk head. They made a horizontal line and were spaced several feet apart. He frowned slightly and tasted his beer.

The glass was half empty when another man entered the Elkhorn Saloon. That made two of them besides the bartender, but he didn't turn to look. The newcomer bellied up to the bar and shot sidelong glances at Butler.

Finally he faced around and said, "You're Chet Butler, aren't you?"

There was no question in the voice, nor any friendliness, either. He knows damn well I'm Chet Butler, Chet thought. He turned and looked, and saw a man slightly smaller than himself. He wore a brown coat and trousers. His hat was clean and expensive looking, in contrast to Butler's own sweat-stained hard felt. The man's face was thinner, too, than Chet's angular, square-jawed countenance. Butler let his eyes drop first to the man's hands, and then to his feet. That's where you see the mark of a man, he thought.

The hands were sun browned but still soft looking, and he wore shoes instead of boots. Something about him, perhaps the too-pale face, spoke of smoky rooms, too much liquor. The soft hands looked as if they would be deft in the handling of cards, although Butler was not sure of this.

"Who are you?" he asked bluntly, his voice coming deep and clear.

As if he hadn't already done so the minute he entered the saloon, the man looked down at Butler's slim hips. When he saw no gun there he smiled slightly and said, "My name's Russ Sands. Does that mean anything to you?"

"Why should it?"

Sands shrugged. "I knew your brother, Jody Butler."

Chet Butler turned back to his beer, twirling the glass slowly. He said, "A lot of people knew Jody, it seems. What's your special claim?"

The smile dropped from Sands's lips and was replaced by a scowl. He shifted his glance to the bartender and nodded slightly. The man in the white apron dribbled whisky into a glass and handed it to Sands, who drank it down in one gulp.

A door opened at the far end of the room and a tall, thin man came into the room. His face had two deep seams down each side. His eyes were an amber shade. They flicked about the room for a moment, then came to rest on Butler. Chet realized this man had been listening, awaiting his cue to enter by the back door.

The tall, thin man moved to a nearby table and, sliding out a chair, sat down. Chet's stomach muscles tightened. You come into town for the first time in ten years, and already you're getting into a fight, he thought. He knew the only sensible thing to do was to walk out of the saloon before further trouble developed.

But his feet wouldn't let him leave. Perhaps it was a mixture of pride and anger that held him there. That's what it had been ten years ago.

Sands glanced at the thin man at the table and then said, "What's my special claim on Jody Butler? I'll tell you. Everybody liked Jody, but he had one fault—he loved to gamble."

That was true.

The unblinking eyes continued to stare at Chet as Sands went on talking. "He got in to me for five hundred dollars, and now he's dead. I want that money."

Chet stood facing Sands, leaning forward slightly on the balls of his feet. His large hands hung at his sides, the fingers spread. His temper was going with each word that Sands spoke, and he recognized the signs. It made him a little sick. His quick temper was what he had been trying to get rid of for ten years and here it was, back again at the first sign of trouble.

Without even thinking about it, he gritted, "When my brother lost his life, you lost your five hundred, Sands. You won't get a cent out of me."

Sands moved away from the bar a little. He said, "I've got proof." Without looking away, he nodded his head sideways toward the tall, thin man at the table. "Les Quarles will tell you."

"That's right," the thin man said without inflection.

Chet jerked his head about and faced Quarles. He was conscious of the large room

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behind Quarles, the empty poker tables of the saloon and gambling house, but he never took his eyes from Quarles. He felt that from here would come the danger. He was wrong.

Quarles shoved to his feet suddenly, the chair toppling over. He shouted, "Look out, Russ. He's got a gun."

Butler turned back in time to see Sands produce a pistol from under the belt of his trousers. He stared down the black hole of the barrel and tried to move out of the way, but the black hole turned orange and he felt the heat of the blast.

The bullet ripped into him, jerking his shoulder around. Searing pain shot through his chest as he dove forward, reaching for Sands with his good arm. As he moved he watched the gun, expecting it to blossom flame once more.

AND then he was falling. His outstretched hand raked down the front of Sands's coat and he fell heavily, hearing voices as from a great distance.

"You missed, damn it," he heard Quarles say, before the room faded into blackness. He heard no more.

Sands said nothing for a long moment; then he turned to Quarles. "This was a damn fool play, anyway. I've an idea he can show us where it is. We could search that park for months before we found it."

Quarles scowled, glaring down at Butler on the floor of his saloon.

Then the bartender announced, "Here comes the sheriff."

He drew a pistol from under his apron and slid it down the bar top. Sands grabbed it up, fired it once into the wall behind him, and then shoved it into Chet's limp hand.

The sheriff came into the room from the street. He was a man of forty, perhaps, with a sprinkling of gray at his temples. He stopped inside the batwings and looked down at Butler's limp form, and then up at Sands. His face darkened in anger, and his eyes narrowed.

"I warned you, Sands," the sheriff said.

Sands looked first at the bartender and then at Quarles, his mouth hanging open in amazement. "Warned me?" he exclaimed. "This man went crazy with that gun. I asked him to pay up what his brother owed me, and he drew his pistol and started firing."

Quarles moved up beside Sands. "That's right, Underwood," he said. "I saw the whole thing. The way you came running in here, you must have heard me shout a warning to Russ."

Underwood studied the two men and then dropped down beside Butler. "He's still alive," he said. He looked up. "Get Doc Keller over here."

Quarles went to the door of the saloon and gave the order to somebody in the gathering crowd outside. Underwood took the pistol from Chet's hand and sniffed the barrel. He looked up.

"I heard two shots, spaced far apart," he stated. "How did that happen?"

"Like I told you, Underwood, he went crazy," Sands repeated, in a voice pitched high for emphasis. "Before I even knew what was happening, he cuts loose with that pistol. Quarles saw him come out with it, and he shouted. I ducked and Butler's shot went over my head and into the wall back there. I had my pistol out by then. He jumped at me like he was going to tear me apart, and then I fired."

Underwood searched the back wall until he saw the small round hole. For some time he studied it, standing up and then stooping down again.

"He's a damn poor shot," he said finally.

Doc Keller, a large, clumsy-appearing man, bustled into the saloon and dropped, without a nod or a word, beside Chet Butler. He rolled him over gently and then tore the shirt away from the wound.

"Let's get him over to the house," Keller said. "I can't probe for that bullet here."

When Chet came to his senses, he found that he was in bed, and it was hard to breathe because of the bandages with which he was swathed. He looked about the small bedroom, seeing a dark chest of drawers against one wall, a print of George Washington on another wall. Directly across the room was the window. Sunlight dappled the floor of the room, shining through a giant elm outside.

There was a bedside table, too, and on it stood a pitcher of water and a glass. The place had an antiseptic smell about it, and

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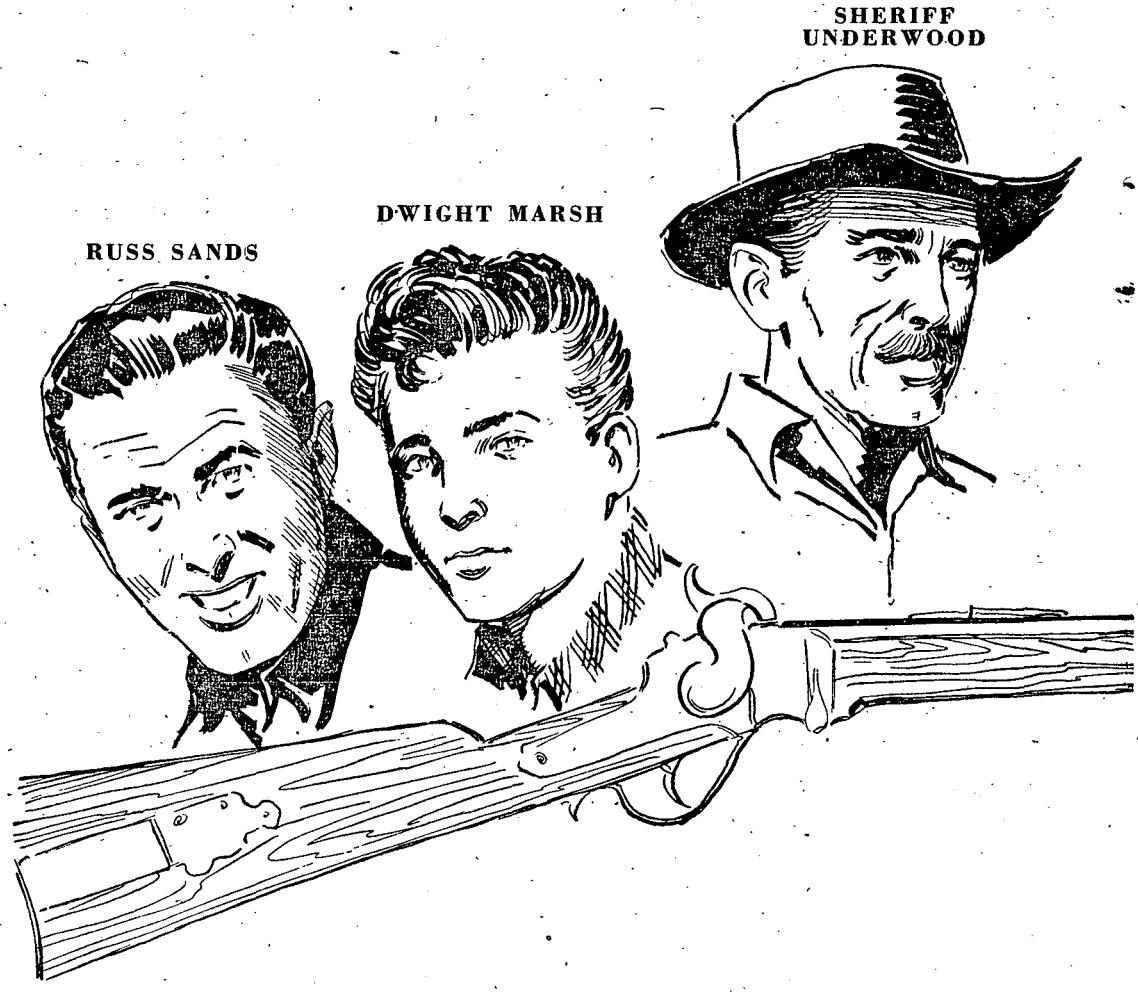

he guessed he was upstairs in the doctor's house.

He was thirsty, and tried to reach for the glass. It was hard work. Just as he got his fingers on the glass, pain shot through his chest and he groaned involuntarily. The glass fell to the floor and shattered. Chet dropped weakly back onto his pillow.

Then came the tap-tap of footsteps on the stairs and he thought wryly, I guess I'll catch hell now. The door opened and a young woman walked into the room. She looked at him shyly for a moment, then turned away.

"Now look what you've done," she scolded.

"I'm thirsty," Chet said.

She stopped and began to pick up the pieces of the glass from the floor, dropping them into the palm of one hand. Chet turned his head and watched her.

She was pretty—perhaps not beautiful, but there was a freshness about her. For some reason he thought of the mountain air of his ranch. Her hair was dark and her complexion smooth, and slightly tan as if she liked to ride in the sun whenever she had a chance, which wasn't very often. When she looked up at him he saw that her eyes were dark, too. Their gazes held for a moment, and then she turned away again to finish her task, blushing slightly.

"I'll get you another glass," she said, straightening up.

She was gone for a few minutes, then reappeared carrying another water glass. She

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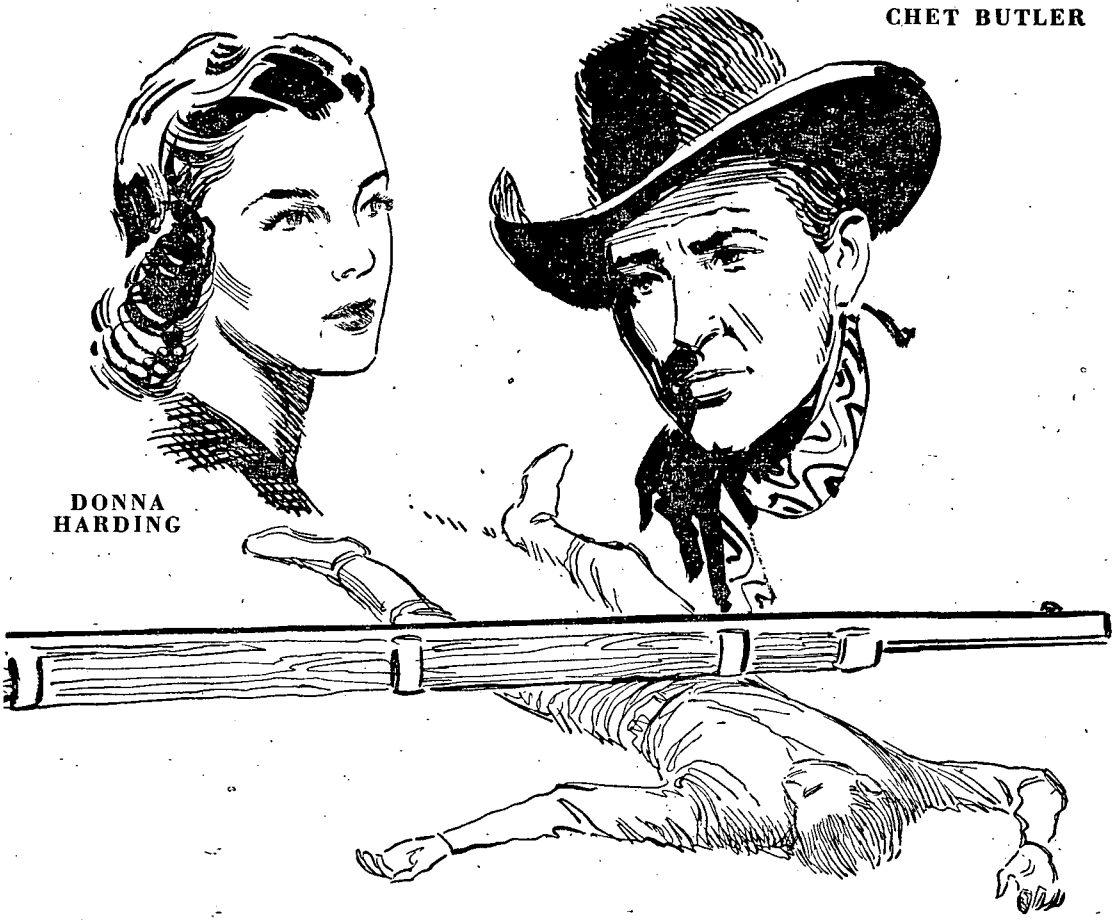

filled it from the pitcher and then lifted his head with one small hand while she tilted the glass to his lips with the other.

He drank deeply, looking at her hand on the glass first and then up her arm until he reached her face again. When he had drunk his fill, he sank back and found that he was weak even from that little exertion.

"You had a close call, Mr. Butler," she said. "I'm Donna Harding, your nurse."

"How long have I been here?"

She smiled, showing even white teeth. "Since yesterday afternoon."

He closed his eyes, thinking, remembering. When he opened them again she was at the door.

"Wait." She turned back into the room, her eyebrows lifted. "What happened?" he asked.

As she came back across the room, he watched the smooth flow of her walking. She filled out the blue dress in a way that drew his eyes. She stopped beside the bed.

"I remember a man named Russ Sands shooting at me. After that it's pretty much of a blank."

She frowned and said, "I'm not sure. The talk is that you pulled a gun on Sands and fired first, but missed."

"And you don't believe it?"

SHE hesitated and then shook her head slowly, studying his face all the while. "I don't think you were carrying a gun,

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Mr. Butler," she told him seriously.

He studied her for a moment, and realized suddenly that this was the first woman he had talked to in ten years. He said, "What makes you think that, Miss Harding?"

There was a chair beyond the bedside table. Donna Harding drew it over near the bed, sat down, and said, "I knew Jody."

They looked at each other as if that explained everything. He thought that perhaps she was going to cry, but only a little moisture appeared at the edges of her eyelids. Yes, Jody would know this girl, because she was his kind, clean and sweet.

"He told you about me?" Chet asked.

She shook her head. "He didn't tell me very much. I don't think he knew very much."

No, he didn't. He didn't know the what nor the why of their lonely existence.

"He said you didn't like people or towns," she went on. "You did most of the work, Jody always claimed. You used to tell him to go into town and have a little fun, yet you wouldn't do it yourself."

He looked away, staring at the yellowing paper on the ceiling. He had watched the movement of her lips as she talked, he had studied her face and her figure, and the first faint flush of something he didn't quite understand moved in him. It was if he were an empty hall in which a single, beautiful note of music had sounded.

A long silence followed. Then she said, "He was shot, wasn't he?"

Chet nodded, still looking at the ceiling. "Up at the far end of our range. I heard the shot, but he was dead by the time I got there."

She listened to the words that held no expression. They had come out flat, without feeling. She had come close to loving Jody, and this apparent disregard for Jody's life angered her.

"He was shot a week ago," she cried. "You told them that when you first came into town. Don't you care who did it? You didn't even go to the sheriff."

Color drained from his face as he twisted his head to look at her. His lips were white when he spoke, and the words sounded harsh, venomous.

"What do you know how I felt? Jody was more like a son to me than a brother. I raised him. For ten years he was the only person I had to talk to. Don't I care? I'll kill the man when I find him."

She stared wide-eyed at his sudden outburst, a little frightened at the rage that burned within him. It showed in his eyes like a flame through a window. But it burned for only a minute and then died again.

She got up and replaced the chair beside the table. At the door to the room she turned and said, "You'd better sleep now, Mr. Butler."

He lay tense for some time after Donna had left. As little as he had told her of Jody's death, it was all he knew. He had found his brother lying face down at the edge of the meadow, with a hole made by a large calibre bullet in his back. He buried Jody that same day near the spot where he had found him, erecting a simple cross over the lonely grave.

Jody had had sparkling eyes, a flashing smile. Jody, who loved everything and everybody, was dead at twenty-four without apparent reason. Chet lay in the bed, remembering the week that followed his brother's death.

Stark loneliness had lain over the cabin, over the whole tiny park that held their ranch. But Chet had stayed there until the blind rage that posessed him had subsided. Only then did he feel it was safe for him to come into Gunnison for supplies and to report his brother's death.

The town had been startled when he'd ridden in and told them at the Gunnison Mercantile who he was. He found that he was near to being a legend. Everybody had heard of him, there were many stories, but nobody had ever seen him. And when he told them of Jody's death, they regarded him with anger and suspicion, as if he might have done the killing himself. He had left there, after buying his supplies, and walked over to the Elkhorn Saloon. That was always the center for talk, and talk was one thing he needed.

He tried to roll over in the bed, but pain shot through his chest whenever he moved. He cursed the wound silently, for he wanted to ride out of Gunnison, back to the ranch.

He didn't ride for a week. Donna was

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with him most of that week, for she had to feed and bathe him. In spite of himself he found he was being drawn closer and closer to her. He could tell by the way she looked at him that she felt the same way. Yet this could not be, he told himself. The winters were hard in his small mountain park, almost more than a person could bear without a finer home than his little shack.

But the feeling that possessed him was beyond his control. It was something that passed between them whenever she came into the room, and neither of them could stop it.

His condition improved rapidly, and in a few day he was sitting up in bed. It was then that Sheriff Underwood paid his first visit. Chet glanced over the paper he was reading when the door opened, expecting his visitor to be the doctor. He dropped the paper on top of the bed clothes as he looked at the stranger. The star on Underwood's coat told him who the man was, and now he studied the dark face.

Underwood nodded at him and observed, "You're looking better than the last time I saw you, Butler."

"If you saw me right after that shooting scrape, then I'll tell you I certainly feel better."

UNDERWOOD came over to the bedside and looked down at Chet. His face was an expressionless mask, but his voice changed when he spoke next, coming out harder than before.

"Do you own a Sharp's Fifty rifle, Butler?" he asked.

"One of those buffalo guns? What use would I find for that?"

Underwood's dark eyes narrowed. "Somebody found use for one. Your brother was shot with that rifle."

"How do you know?" Chet asked, his pulse quickening.

"Because, while you've been lying here getting well, I rode up to your ranch and exhumed the body." Chet jerked forward, and Underwood reached out to hold him down. "Oh, I had a court order, all right." He reached into his pocket and drew out a heavy, dark object. He tossed it onto the paper in front of Chet.

"There's the slug that killed your brother," he said.

Chet glanced down at the blunted piece of lead, and found that his anger was directed toward it for a moment. But when he lifted it in his hand, his anger toward it disappeared. He hefted it, then handed it back to Underwood.

"Thanks for the information, Sheriff," he said, looking straight ahead.

Underwood studied the big man in the bed, knowing he was only touching the surface of the real man. He wondered at a person who could live in the mountains for ten years without coming to town even once. Was such a man capable of killing his brother. He didn't know.

He said, "Look here, Butler. Don't get any ideas about finding the killer yourself. That's what I'm here for. With that temper of yours—"

Chet jerked around, glaring hotly at Underwood. "What do you know about my temper?" he demanded.

Underwood frowned at the outburst. "Just what Quarles and Sands told me about the way you jumped them with your gun."

"What gun?"

"The one that was in your hand when I found you."

"Did you ask anybody else whether I was carrying a gun or not?"

Underwood nodded, and his frown deepened. "I'll admit most of the people that saw you before you went into the Elkhorn thought you were unarmed, but there was a pistol in your hand when I found you."

Butler shook his head, and looked at the wall behind the sheriff. "I wasn't armed, Underwood, no matter what those two gamblers say. I'll never go armed in town."

Underwood studied him, turning the last emphatic words over in his mind. There was something there he was missing. He shrugged and left the room, saying as he went out the door, "I mean what I said about letting the law take its course."

What could the law find out about Jody's death? he thought after Underwood had left. What could he himself find out? He could find a man with a Sharp's Fifty buffalo gun, and then prove he had used it to kill Jody.

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But find the gun first. Chet shook his head and slid wearily down from his sitting position. He dropped off to sleep a few minutes later.

Several days after the sheriff's visit, Chet rode out of Gunnison. He was astride his sorrel gelding and was leading his pack horse with the supplies he had purchased the week before. It was over the protests of Dr. Keller that he rode out of town, for the doctor had told him that the wound could still hemorrhage.

As he rode away from the house, he looked back at Donna who was standing on the porch. She raised a hand in farewell and he returned the salute with his good arm, remembering her last words.

"Goodbye, Chet," she'd said quietly. "Be careful. I'll be thinking of you."

And he'd be thinking of her, only he hadn't told her that. When he'd opened his mouth the words hadn't come out and all he'd been able to say was a simple "Good-by, Donna."

It was a long ride to the mountain ranch over the winding and sometimes precipitous trail. Ahead, gaunt blue granite peaks thrust upward, ringed with clouds that looked like neck ruffles. Those were the jagged peaks that shadowed the range of Slash CJ, his and Jody's ranch.

It was like being enfolded in familiar arms when he rode into the meadow late in the afternoon. He thought of Donna for a moment before he dropped into the small park, although he certainly had not felt the comfort of her arms. He shrugged away the thought and went on toward the small cabin that he and Jody had shared for so many years.

Many cattle grazed the heavy grass and they looked around at him as he rode among them, their eyes rolling whitely before they bent their heads to continue their eternal feeding.

It was a rich park, a mile or so long and nearly that wide. Not far from the cabin, hay was stacked in hand-tied bales. Chet was glad they'd finished with the haying. He was more weary than he'd have liked to admit.

In front of the cabin, he dropped out of the saddle and left his mount and the pack animal tied to one of the horizontal poles of the small corral. He went into the one-room cabin and dropped onto his bunk, his nerves tingling from the long ride.

Letting his eyes rove over the room, he decided that it looked like a bachelor's quarters, all right. It was simply furnished, with a stove in one corner, an old table in the center of the room, and Jody's bunk at right angles to his own against the end wall.

His eyes dropped to a chest on the floor at the foot of the opposite bunk. The simple wooden box was battered and scarred. It had been Jody's, and he remembered as if it had been only last week the day that a fourteen-year-old boy had proudly carried the chest in and dropped it at the foot of his bunk. There it had remained over the years, the only closet the boy possessed. Chet's vision blurred for a moment, and he closed his eyes. When he opened them again the sun was touching the peaks to the west of the park.

He got up and unloaded the pack horse, working slowly, knowing that too much weight on the one arm would cause the wound to start bleeding again.

WHEN that job was done, he went to the foot of his own bed and opened the chest there. From it he drew a clean shirt which he drew on over his bare shoulders, first studying the bandaged wound for a moment. He was about to close the chest again when he saw something else. Digging through the clothes there, he reached out the pistol he had caught a glimpse of. It was his own pistol and belt, but it lay on top of a shirt near the bottom of the chest.

He put the clothes back in the box and straightened up. That pistol, unworn for ten years, had always been on the very bottom of the chest. Frowning now, he moved about the room, looking at the things on the shelves that lined the walls. Everything had been moved and then carefully set back again, as if somebody were hunting for something.

He remembered that Sheriff Underwood had been here, and he suspected that the sheriff had searched the place. But would he have moved everything in his search for something as large as a Sharp's Fifty rifle? It hardly seemed likely.

Chet had started the fire in the cook stove

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in preparation for fixing his supper, when the three shots came. They were closely spaced, a distress signal.

He ran from the house, stopping for a minute outside the door to look up the park in the direction from which the shots had come. That was the same direction from which the shot that had killed Jody had come. It had been a dull booming sound, but these last shots had been made by a pistol fired into the air.

He swung up on the sorrel and set off across the park. He pushed the horse into a jog and then a lope, when he became conscious that his wound hurt more from the roughness of the slower pace.

It was early dusk, with the sky still bright over the peaks to the west, but a darkness was stealing across the sky from the east, bringing chill air with it. The peaks were slashed with deep shadows, with an occasional spot of lighter snow gleaming from a deeply eroded ravine.

He rode to the head of the park and splashed across the small stream that furnished it with water. Here the trees closed in about him for a few minutes and then he was out of them again, riding across loose, rocky ground—the talus from the peaks.

He searched about him, uncertain now in which direction to ride. Then he saw a horse, partly hidden in the boulders some distance ahead of him. He rode to it. It was a pack animal, poor stock. It stepped and snorted nervously as he approached, backing off from him.

A low moaning sound drew his attention, and he dismounted and went scrambling toward it. In a small pocket between boulders a man lay, only just now coming to consciousness. He opened his eyes, one of which was already blackening, and looked up at Chet. Chet dropped into the small space and bent over the man. He saw then that he was probably not over nineteen or twenty.

"What happened?" Chet asked.

The man stared up blankly, then answered, "I fell."

Chet frowned, wondering at this. He guessed from his clothing that the youth was a prospector, yet the pale face looked as if he had not spent much time in the open.

"Can you get up?"

The youth struggled upward and managed a sitting position. He shook his head several times as if to clear it. "I heard your shots," Chet said. "Who are you?"

The man said, "What?" Then, "Dwight—Marsh."

Chet smiled at him and said, "Well, Dwight, I guess we'd better get you back to the cabin."

He helped the youth to his feet and then into the saddle of the sorrel, where he sat, swaying slightly, holding to the horn. Chet walked back, leading Marsh's pack horse and the sorrel. They didn't talk again until they were in the cabin.

It was warm in there, and Marsh stumbled to the table and dropped his head into his arms. Chet set about preparing supper for the two of them, casting a glance at Dwight Marsh's back. It was thin, not at all like he expected to find on a prospector. Prospecting was a hard life, and after a few summers of swinging a pick a man developed cords and muscles across his back.

Twice during the meal, Chet tried to strike up a conversation with the youth. But Marsh remained silent—not sullen, but almost as if he were frightened at something.

Chet studied his face. The bruises there didn't look like something a man would receive from a fall. The flesh wasn't scatched and broken, but was bruised beneath the surface, as if something softer than a rock had come in contact with his face. Like a fist, maybe.

Marsh climbed into Jody's bunk right after the meal and dropped into a death-like sleep. Chet, worn out himself, followed soon after.

The next morning, after they had finished breakfast and were standing in the doorway of the cabin, looking out over the park, Marsh said, "I heard tell there's gold up here."

Chet puffed on his cigarette and chuckled. "You might have heard a lot of things about this ranch," he said. Then he shook his head and let his eyes range upward to the peaks around them. "There's no gold here, Dwight, except a tiny pocket that hasn't got more than a dollar or two in it."

Marsh looked around at him quickly. "How do you know what it's worth? You're no prospector."

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Chet shrugged and said, "I haven't lived here all my life." For some reason he felt paternal toward this Dwight Marsh, although he was not more than ten or twelve years Dwight's senor. "I spent some time in Lake City when the gold rush was on. That was—"

He stopped in the middle of the sentence and turned back into the cabin. Marsh watched him go, a puzzled look on his thin face. It was almost as if Chet Butler had said more than he intended.

MARSH walked slowly away from the cabin. His jaw was still sore from where they had hit him, and he vowed to get even when he got back—and knew at the same time that he would do nothing about it.

He looked around him, rubbing his jaw tenderly. This was a quiet place, all right. He didn't understand how a man could stay here for ten years without coming out. But there was something that he liked about the park. Maybe it was the gold that he was sure, now was here. He smiled secretly. With his cut he could quit that lousy job playing piano in the Elkhorn.

"Hitting the trail again today?"

Dwight turned and saw that Chet had come up behind him. The frailness of the boy struck Chet again, and he knew he wasn't a prospector. This should have worried Chet more than it did. The idea played tag with the edges of worry, but mostly he only felt concern for the youth.

"How about showing me that pocket you were talking about?" Dwight asked. "Maybe you were wrong about it."

Chet shook his head and chuckled aloud. "I wasn't wrong. But I'll show it to you, since you're so set on seeing it."

They saddled up and Chet watched with amusement as Dwight struggled with the cinch. It was obvious that the youth had not saddled many horses. Then he wondered if there could be any connection between Dwight Marsh and Jody.

They rode straight across the park and up a canyon that cut sharply back into the mountains. Chet reined in beside an outcropping of rocks and said, "Well, there you are."

Marsh looked about him helplessly. When he met Chet's eyes, his own were worried. Then he thrust his chin out and said, "What are you trying to pull on me, Butler? I don't see anything here."

"If you were a prospector you would," Chet told him, his voice sharp. His curiosity about Marsh was strong now and he asked, "What did you really come up here for, Marsh?"

Marsh's confidence sagged and he stammered, "I—I told you. I'm a prospector."

Chet swung out of the saddle and let his horse drink out of the tiny creek in the bottom of the canyon. "Jody told me about the rumors floating around. Seems like they got stronger and stronger as time went on. I never figured anybody was serious about it, though. Anybody that knows anything about prospecting could see this isn't a mineralized area. It's just solid gray granite."

Marsh's thin face was white. He said, "Then you were just joking about the pocket up here."

Chet shook his head. "No. There's a tiny pocket here, and it's the only one I've ever found." He smiled to himself. "And I've looked these mountains over well in the past few years."

The color came back to Marsh's face, and he swung off the horse. Chet led him to a small discoloration on the outcropping granite.

"Somebody has already hacked away most of it," he said. "That was years ago. I never could figure out why any sane prospector came up here in the first place."

Marsh seemed not to hear. From his belt he drew out a small pick and began hacking away at the rock. The mineralized part was softer than the parent rock, and soon he had several handfuls of the ore. This he dropped into a saddle bag.

Chet watched the intent face as the youth pounded away at the rock. Talk about gold fever! Marsh was oblivious to everything around him. When he had buckled the saddle bag, he swung into the saddle, a triumphant smile on his young face.

As he reined the horse around, he said to Chet, "You've kept the secret all these years, and now it's out, Butler."

He spurred away, and Chet watched him

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go. But, of course, Marsh was talking about the secret of the gold, not the other secret. The ticklish feeling in the pit of Chet's stomach went away and he mounted up, following Marsh back to the cabin. Marsh seemed to be in a hurry to leave the ranch. By the time Chet reached there Marsh was leading his pack horse out of the corral.

Chet dismounted and said, "Don't get excited about that ore, Marsh. I'm telling you it's nothing."

Marsh looked at Chet as if he were a lunatic. Then he walked away without a word, leading his horse out of the park. If he hurried he'd make Gunnison by dark.

Later that afternoon Marsh walked into a small clearing and saw the men near the far end, stretched out on the short grass. Their horses grazed nearby. At the sound of Marsh's approach they looked up, then clambered to their feet.

"How'd it go, kid?" Russ Sands asked eagerly. "Did you find the place?"

Marsh looked at Sands, not forgetting that it was the gambler that had laid into him, giving him the black eye and the sore jaw. That hadn't been included in the plans, at least not that he had heard about, and the memory rankled.

"Well, what about it?" Quarles demanded.

Marsh turned defiantly toward Quarles, his determination ebbing only slightly when he looked into the cold eyes that glared at him from the thin, seamed face. "I want more than a quarter share," Marsh demanded. "I want to be cut in for a third."

Quarles and Sands both stepped closer. The two gamblers glanced at each other and seemed to reach an agreement without speaking. Sands stepped in suddenly and slammed a hard right to Marsh's thin jaw. Marsh fell like a cut lodgepole pine.

"Damn kid," breathed Sands.

They both went for the saddle bag, jerking it open with clawing fingers. Sands reached inside and drew out a fist-sized rock. They studied it, their eyes squinting.

Quarles looked at Sands finally and asked, "What do you think? Is it any good?"

There was excitement in Sand's voice when he answered. "Color's good," he said. "But we'll have to send it off to the assayer in Lake

The bullet ripped into Chet, jerking his shoulder around

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City to make sure. That'll take a couple of days."

"It's good," Marsh stated, getting to his feet.

They both turned and looked at the youth. Sands growled, "What do you know about it?"

Marsh said, "Butler wanted to make mighty sure I didn't think there was anything there but a small pocket." He nodded knowingly. "There's plenty."

Sands dropped the rock back into the saddle bag and then stood, rubbing the stubble of beard on his chin. His eyes took on a faraway look as he thought. Then he spoke in a low voice that was tight with hate.

"I've waited a long time for this," he murmured. "Ten years to find what was rightfully mine. Now I'm going to make it pay off, but good."

Marsh looked from Sands to Quarles and back again. He was afraid of these two partners of his and wished that he hadn't gotten mixed up with them. But there was the gold to be considered. When he thought of that, almost anything seemed worhwhile—all except what they planned next.

"About time for you to be hiking back to Gunnison, kid," Sands said. "Les and I have a little more work to do up here."

Marsh had seen that look in Russ Sands's eyes once before, and that time a man had ended up dead outside the Elkhorn Saloon. Now he asked quickly, "What are you aiming to do, Russ?"

A thin smile touched Sands's lips. He said, "Something I've been waiting ten years to do." The smile left his lips and he added, "Now get going, and pack that ore sample off to Lake City as soon as you get in town. Hear?"

Marsh opened his mouth to speak, but Quarles impatiently jerked his pistol from its holster, thumbing back the hammer as he raised it.

"Wait," Sands commanded, reaching over and knocking the pistol toward the ground again. He faced Quarles. "You're too damn impatient, Les. If anything happens to the kid there'll be hell to pay."

Quarles grumbled and holstered the pistol again. "Get going, kid," he ordered harshly.

Dwight turned and started down the mountain toward Gunnison, really frightened now.

BUTLER rested some and then went riding over his range again, checking on cattle, all the time drifting closer to the place where Jody had been buried. Somehow the Marsh kid fit into the puzzle. He was no prospector—that was so obvious it was ludicrous. But his interest in the ore pocket had been genuine, and that puzzled Chet.

It seemed hard to believe that people would think there was gold in the park. But then he guessed they might believe anything—if they wanted to believe it. Especially when it concerned a legendary character such as he seemed to have become.

Then, too, there was that unprovoked attack in the Elkhorn Saloon. There was no doubt in his mind that they had meant to kill him, and Sand's poor aim was the only thing that had saved his life. This Marsh kid didn't seem like the type to get tied up with men like Sands and Quarles, either. Chet shrugged. Perhaps there was no connection between them.

The grave was in a small clearing just off the floor of the park. Chet dismounted at the edge of the trees and walked to the low mound of earth. He could see that the earth had been disturbed, but he held no hard feelings for Sheriff Underwood's action. The man had only been doing his duty.

A small cross stood at the head of the grave, and it seemed to Chet it was only yesterday that he had formed that cross and pounded it into the ground. He had made it out of the same lumber he had used for the coffin.

As he stood with bent head over the grave, he thought over the past years, picturing Jody in various stages of growth from gangling youth to bright, optimistic young manhood. He felt the storm clouds gathering and he forced himself to think of other things, of the things that had brought them to the park ten years ago.

He and Jody had been in Lake City when that town was booming. He, Chet, had been twenty and too cocky. He was fast with a gun; he had demonstrated it plenty of times

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outside of town in shooting contests. Fourteen-year-old Jody always watched these contests with wide eyes that shone with pride when Chet came off the winner. Then they'd go back to the old Hotel Dominion and bask in easily won glory.

But this particular night, Chet remembered, he had left Jody at the hotel and had gone to a nearby saloon. He couldn't even remember its name now. A little liquor had inflamed him with foolish pride, and he had been the cock-of-the-walk that night.

But others had been drinking, too, and one of these men was a prospector, who had just struck it rich—or so he claimed. Smart words had led to angry words, and in a few minutes the two were facing each other across a bare floor, hands poised over guns, lips pressed tight against teeth.

This had been something new to Chet, this facing a human target. Even his name, the Gunnison Kid, connotated killer experience; but this was not so. As he faced the man, Luke Dore, he had been scared. He had wanted to run, but that was out of the question to a twenty-year-old who was the bane of Lake City's gunslingers.

Luke Dore had gone for his gun first and then Chet, the Gunnison Kid, had reacted automatically. It was no contest, really. Luke Dore was dead before he had a chance to fire.

In the short silence that followed the shooting, Chet had left the saloon and hurried back to the hotel. They'd packed and left town before the news reached the hotel, and Chet had made some excuse or other to Jody to account for their hurried exit.

Down to Gunnison they'd gone, and then into the mountains. In the park was an old cabin and they'd settled there, making a living for ten years where somebody else had failed. And now Jody was dead, and it seemed to Chet that his reason for existence had left him. The senseless killing had left an emptiness that time would not fill, it seemed.

He turned away from the grave and walked slowly back to his horse. Had he really been hiding all these years? Or had he been afraid of his own temper and his own prowess with a gun? As he swung into the saddle and reined about, he remembered the long months when the memory of killing Luke Dore had plagued him. He wasn't fit to be a member of society, he had felt, and so he had retreated where he could do no one harm.

And now Jody's death had shoved him out into the world again where, the first day, he had been goaded into a fight. He knew that if he had worn a gun that day, Russ Sands and possibly Quarles would be dead now.

He rode back into the park, thinking of Donna Harding. The picture of her face was clear in his mind, because it had been etched there over the days they had spent together. What right did he have to want her? He couldn't live like a civilized human, because his hand was too fast and his temper too hot.

All right, he thought, riding toward the cabin. If that's the way you are, then let somebody, the somebody who killed Jody, feel the wrath of your temper. After that he could give himself up to the authorities for the other killing and; in that way, relieve the pressure he had carried inside for ten years.

The park was bathed in late afternoon sunlight as he rode toward the cabin. It was built near the edge of the aspen and pine that ringed the park, and was a simple structure with a door in the center and a small window on each side. Behind it, in the trees, a spring bubbled into a small damned-up pond.

Chet dismounted at the corral and walked to the cabin. Then he got a bucket and headed for the spring. He entered the trees over a narrow path. When he came to the pool he looked down at his wavering reflection in the water. He wasn't particularly handsome, he noted, and wondered what had given him the idea that Donna Harding might have an interest in him.

THERE was a slight rustling noise off to his left and he turned, peering into the high underbrush beneath the trees. Sunlight came in small beams through the branches overhead, and one of these reflected blue off a rifle barrel. Chet saw it a moment before it exploded.

He dove for the ground and the bullet ripped bark from a tree behind him. He looked down at his hip and found his right hand poised over the gun that wasn't there. Even after all these years the reflex was there.

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Except for the underbrush, there was nothing between himself and the rifleman. He lay quietly on the damp ground, feeling his heart beat heavily. There was pain in the wound in his chest, and the throbbing of his heart seemed localized there. Then he heard movement almost straight ahead of him. There were two of the ambushers.

His situation was not good. If he entered the brush he would give his position away. If he made a run for it back along the path, he would be in plain sight. But he had an idea.

Taking the pail with him, he rose suddenly and dashed back toward the cabin, dropping to the ground again before he left the trees. Four shots exploded behind him, a second too late. From his prone position he rattled brush beside the trail, and then tossed the bucket in a low arc into the underbrush.

Again the guns broke into a roar, but this time they were aimed at the noise he'd created. He crawled quickly to the edge of the trees and then dashed for the cabin.

His first thought, once inside, was for the gun and belt in his chest. But when he touched the lid of the box he stopped, unable to go farther. The memory of that other time clutched at him, and he let his hands drop. Why the rifle that he pulled down from where it hung on the wall was any different from the pistol, he didn't know. But it was.

There were no windows at the back of the cabin nor in the two end walls. He waited just inside the door for his attackers to appear. His chest was heaving from his exertions, and each breath brought a sharp stab of pain.

For a long time he waited, the pain in his chest a regular jab with each breath. The sun dropped behind the peaks, and he realized that his attackers were waiting for darkness. His strength was going, and he drew a chair over near the door and sat down.

It seemed as if it took hours for darkness to come that evening, though usually it dropped over the park with startling suddenness. He still had the advantage over them for, even in the darkness, he would be able to see their outlines as they approached the cabin. But they didn't come from the front. He heard them moving around in the brush, and it was some time before he figured out what they were up to.

They meant to burn him out, and shoot him down as he ran into the open. Taking the rifle with him, he went to the door and peered into the darkness. He saw nothing and moved on into the night, walking carefully straight out into the park.

Some distance away he dropped wearily into the grass and watched the dark outline of the cabin. The rifle lay on the grass in front of him, shining dully in the starlight. The brush they had piled against the back of the cabin flared up suddenly, and he saw two running figures move into the darkness outside of the growing circle of yellow light. It was Sands and Quarles.

They were much too far from him for an accurate shot, and he wasn't sure he wanted to shoot them, anyway. One killing had affected his life for ten years. What would two more do?

The cabin burned quickly, once it had caught fire. Everything he owned, every memory of Jody, was in that cabin they had occupied for ten years. He felt the anger rising in him, and with it came a sharper stabbing pain in his chest. Something rose in his throat and he coughed weakly, his hand over his mouth. When he drew it away there were several small dark spots—blood.

He dared not move now. Any jolt, like the kick of a rifle, might complete the rupture, filling his lungs with hot, strangling blood.

He watched the fire until it died down to wavering fingers of color. He dropped his head to his arms. Some time later he heard the sound of horses fading away in the direction of the trail to Gunnison. Whether they thought he had perished in the blaze, or whether they had discovered his escape, he didn't know, nor did he care. He dropped his head again and slept.

When he awoke he was shivering. The spasms started with a slight shaking and ended in violent jerks. The shivering stirred his stomach into nausea. He opened his eyes to the biting morning air.

The sun was just touching the peaks, and sunlight was marching across the park toward him. When it reached him, he sat up and basked in its warmth until the shaking in him stopped.

The cabin, what was left of it, lay black

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and cold, some distance away. He could smell the damp ash smell of it, and he shoved to his feet and walked over. There was little left. A few metal objects lay on the dirt floor. He poked around the ruins for some time, finding nothing of value. His old pistol lay starkly alone, the box and the holster having been burned away. He picked it up and looked at it. Perhaps he could put it into operating condition again.

A short distance from the cabin a large boulder thrust out of the level ground. He went over and sat down, the pistol still in his hand. He looked at the dark rectangle of ground where the cabin had been.

With the destruction of the cabin he found that he felt detached from his past life, and it appeared in a different light than it had before. He had been trying to run away from himself, and nothing or nobody else.

HE LOOKED down at his hands. They were the same hands that had wielded the pistol which killed Luke Dore. What good had running done? He couldn't run away from the reflex that was his, nor the savage temper that sometimes possessed him. So why run at all?

Perhaps his hiding here in the mountains had prevented his killing another man, he rationalized, and then knew that the same effect could have been achieved by his own refusal to wear a gun. And couldn't his savage temper have been bridled if he had really tried to bridle it?

For some time he sat warming himself in the sun, the fire-scarred pistol in his hand, his rifle leaning against the rock at his side. This attack, he decided, was connected with the Marsh youth and what he thought to be a rich discovery.

Still, Chet didn't hear the cry of vengeace in his ears, not for this attack. But for Jody, the cry was still there. Each time he thought of his brother a wave of anguish engulfed him. Then it turned to anger that twisted and tore at him until he was tense and his nerves were on edge.

He was in this frame of mind when he heard the sound of hoofs clattering up the lower canyon, coming toward the park. Checking the load in the rifle, he held it across his lap.

It took the rider fifteen minutes to come into sight, and Chet waited patiently. When he saw the movement of the horse and rider in the trees he raised the rifle, holding it just off his shoulder.

The rider was thin and small, and Chet thought immediately of Marsh. But as he drew closer Chet saw that it wasn't the youth. He slid off the rock, a scowl on his face. The bright sun of morning threw a shadow across the upper part of Chet's face and shaded completely the rider's face. The horse was quite close before Chet recognized the rider.

"Donna Harding!" He lowered the rifle and walked toward her.

She was dressed in clothes that were too large for her, and he wondeerd if she had borrowed them from Doc Keller. But no, they weren't that much too large.

Before she stepped from the horse, she looked at the burned-out cabin, then back at Chet. "Are you all right?" she asked anxiously.

He walked up close and held out a hand, and she swung down from the small stable mare. "I'm all right," he said. "But I've had to keep humping to stay that way.

He led her to the rock on which he had been sitting and she dropped down, looking up at him, her face creased in worry. "I think they're going to arrest you, Chet," she said. "I came to warn you."

He leaned the rifle against the rock. "Arrest me? What for?"

She continued to study his face. "They say you killed a man in Lake City ten years ago." She spoke slowly, shaking her head as if she didn't believe it herself and could not understand how anybody else could think such a thing.

He looked away from her, not wanting to tell her it was true, yet knowing there was no use denying it. Evidently somebody had recognized him. It was a relief, in a way, that he had been found out, and yet he was sorry Donna had heard it first from somebody else.

He nodded and asked, "Who said I did this —killing? Underwood?"

"No. From what I gather, Russ Sands, the gambler, says you were the one. He said he was there when you did it. Sheriff Underwood sent a wire to Lake City to check on it."

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"I'm afraid Sands is right," he told her, then watched her expression change from worry to fright.

"You can't stay here, Chet," she cried. "They'll know where to find you."

Her concern for him touched him, and he repressed a desire to reach out and take her hand in his. It had been years since anybody had been concerned over his well-being.

In a low voice, then, he told her of the gunfight in Lake City and of his flight with Jody. She listened, studying him intently, watching the movement of his lips. When he finished her face was soft, her eyes wet.

"I'm sorry," she said. "It's been terrible for you."

"Jody never knew," he said. "We left too soon after the fight. I didn't let him go into town for a long time after we came up here. By that time, the talk had died down." He looked across the park. "He must have wondered why, but he never asked."

She slid down from the boulder and moved close to him, taking his arm. "You can't blame yourself," she told him. "You did what you thought was right. Perhaps it was the best thing, too. Jody might have lost you if you had stayed in Lake City."

He turned and looked down at her. Her nearness, her concern for his welfare, over his natural reticence. He drew her close.

"Chet."

She whispered his name and he kissed her, feeling her arms slide around his shoulders, holding tight to him until he looked out over her head, wishing he hadn't kissed her. He had no right to her, when he thought he would have to stand trial for murder. It would have been better to let things stand as they were. He dropped his arms and stepped away from her.

"You must go away," she told him, her eyes coming up to meet his.

He shook his head. "No, Donna. I'm through with hiding. I'm going to give myself up to Sheriff Underwood."

"You can't," she cried. Her fingers closed on his arm. "Please, Chet. We could go away together."

He regarded her tenderly, knowing how hard it had been for her to say the words. He wanted to cry out against the injustice of having found her just when he would have to lose her again.

But he merely shook his head and said, "I've got to do it, Donna. It wouldn't work any other way."

THE tears came then. She made no sound, but two small rivulets flowed down her cheeks. He turned away and looked up at the granite peaks, not really seeing them but knowing that if he looked at her he would take her in his arms again.

The tears stopped finally. She sniffed and wiped them away on her sleeve. "I'm sorry I'm such a baby," she said in a trembling voice. "I didn't mean to do that."

He said nothing, still not trusting himself to look at her. "We'd better be going, if we're going to go," she said.

Then he did look at her, and saw a wan smile on her lips. He returned the smile, and then went to saddle up the sorrel horse.

As they rode out of the park a short time later, he turned and took a look at it. Perhaps he would be back, but if he wasn't he wanted that one last picture in his mind. The bright sun glistened on the still-wet grass. Most of the cattle were on their feet, and above them were the peaks.

He guessed that he would miss the peaks most of all. They had always been a symbol to him of his own lonely existence, for he thought that nothing could look more alone, and more majestic, than those jagged, thrusting pieces of granite.

Donna rode on ahead and then waited, understanding his need to be alone for that minute. He reined around, finally, and caught up with her. They rode slowly. The pain that had been in his chest the night before was gone, but now there was a new wound in him. He knew it would not heal as quickly as the bullet wound.

The steep trail they had been following leveled off, and they entered a meadow. They rode across it, and then Chet reined in. His eyes were fastened on the ground beneath his horse's hoofs.

Donna reined in, too, and looked at Chet. "What's the matter?"

"I don't know," he said slowly. "Somebody spent some time here recently—like

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maybe they were waiting for something."

She was puzzled at his words, but they meant nothing to her until he deduced aloud, "This is where they waited for that kid."

"Who waited? What are you talking about?"

He told her of the prospector, and then of the burning of his cabin. When he had finished she exclaimed, "But I thought the stove had set the cabin on fire." Her whole being was fraught with new worry now. She added, "Chet, you can't go into Gunnison. Don't you see? They'll kill you."

He set his horse into motion again, heading back down the trail. His face was set in a hard look. Donna hung back for a minute, then she spurred forward and came alongside the sorrel.

"Stop!"

He looked at her, startled at the sharpness of her voice, and reined in.

Her face was white when she spoke, her voice frightened. "I think one of those men was my brother," she told him.

"Your brother!" The words stormed out. "You never told me you had a brother."

She lifted her chin defiantly. "No, we didn't talk much about the past, did we?"

Of course, it would be the boy. That would be where she had borrowed the clothes she was wearing. Somehow all this was connected with Jody's death. The thought made him sick.

"What's he doing mixed up with Sands and Quarles?" he demanded.

"He plays the piano in the Elkhorn. With the money that Dr. Keller pays me for nursing, we get along all right."

She watched Chet's stormy face, sensing the rising anger in him. For a moment there was a chasm between them, and she felt that they were almost strangers again.

"Don't be too hard on him, Chet," she begged. "He did it for me more than for himself. He's always dreamed of having money so that I wouldn't have to work, so that we could live in a fine house and wear fine clothes. He came into town wild with excitement about finding gold. I never dreamed that he'd found it in your park."

A vague picture was beginning to take shape in his mind. There was a reason for Jody's death. Chet's heart beat faster with excitement as he began to fit the pieces together.

He asked, "How long has Russ Sands been in town?"

She frowned. "Not long. Several months, I guess."

"Then that's it," he muttered to himself.

Jody had let slip, probably without knowing the harm he was doing, that he and his brother had been in Lake City years before. Perhaps Sands himself mentioned that he had been there, and Jody had then made his remark.

If Sands had mentioned casually the shooting that had taken place there, Jody could easily have been led to remark that his brother was a top hand with a gun. Then Sands might have put all the casual remarks together and made a guess as to who Jody Butler's brother was.

Still, that didn't explain why Sands had killed Jody. Part of the puzzle was still missing, but Chet had enough of it to raise his excitement to a high pitch. He spurred on down the hill, riding more rapidly now. Donna followed, her face white. This rage in Chet Butler frightened her. When she rode up beside him again, he looked over at her, but his eyes didn't see her.

"Dwight didn't kill Jody," she said. "He wouldn't do that. You said yourself he wasn't there when they burned down your cabin."

She might as well not have spoken. Chet was possessed with a drive that made him oblivious to everything around him. But he must have heard her words, because several minutes later he said, "He doesn't have a thing to worry about if he wasn't in on it."

WHEN they neared town, Chet reined in. "Go on in, and don't let anybody know I'm around. If Sands and Quarles think I'm dead, so much the better."

She started to ride on, then stopped and turned. "Please don't hurt Dwight," she pleaded, searching his eyes for some softness there. But his face was as hard as the mountains out of which they had ridden.

From the cover of trees at the mouth of the canyon out of which they had just ridden, he watched her go on into town. Now to

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find Quarles and Sands and make them talk! One of them would die—the one who had fired the Sharp's that killed Jody.

Chet rode closer to town before he dismounted. It was not much past noon and the town was quiet, lazing in the sun. After tying the sorrel to a small tree, he took the rifle from its scabbard and moved down the alley that ran parallel to the main street of town.

A row of houses had their backyards to the alley, and most of the citizens had built wooden fences to hide the ugliness of the littered alleyway. He passed a cafe and heard the buzz of voices inside. Then he was behind the Elkhorn Saloon. A screen door with the screen half torn off was the back entrance to the saloon. He pulled the door open and stepped inside.

He was in a small storeroom, and he moved quietly to the other door. When he opened it he found that he was at the end of the bar. One customer jawed idly with the bartender, then slid his foot off the brass rail and walked out. Chet shoved on into the large room.

The bartender looked around, and paled at sight of the rifle trained on him. "What do you want?" he asked weakly.

"Where are Quarles and Sands?" Chet demanded.

When the bartender shook his head, Chet asked about Dwight Harding, and was told that the pianist didn't show up until late afternoon when the crowd started to gather.

Chet moved around the bar, not lowering the gun in his hands. He rested the barrel of the rifle on the polished top of the bar and asked, "How long have you been working here?"

"S—six months," the bartender stuttered.

Chet had hoped to get something out of the man, but now he guessed that the bartender knew little or nothing about Quarles's doings. He considered his next move. He could wait here for the pair of gamblers, which was a dangerous thing to do, or he could hide in the brush outside of town until later in the day. He remembered that he had ridden into town with the intention of giving himself up. But that would have to wait until he had settled with the gamblers.

The bartender moved slowly down the bar, out of the line of fire of the rifle. His hands were still raised to shoulder level, his eyes glued on the hole in the end of the rifle barrel. His frightened eyes shifted toward the door and Chet turned, bringing the rifle around. He was too late. Sheriff Underwood trained his pistol on him and ordered him to put the rifle down.

"I warned you about taking the law into your own hands," he said.

So Donna had informed on him and set the sheriff on his trail. Chet dropped the rifle noisily on the bar top, disgust written on his face. He should have known better than to trust a woman, particularly when that woman's brother was involved in a killing.

Underwood walked to the bar and took the rifle. He said, "Let's go, Butler."

Chet stood his ground. "What are you holding me for, Underwood?"

"Well, now, let's call it 'leaving the scene of a crime to escape prosecution.' "

Chet shrugged and started toward the door. "I was going to give myself up anyway," he said.

Underwood followed him outside, the pistol in his hand still trained on Chet's back. "That's what Miss Harding said," Underwood told him. "Seems like you got sidetracked along the way."

"I'll get out and go after them again."

"I told you to let the law take its course."

Chet whirled, his eyes burning with anger. They were in the middle of the street. He glared at Underwood and said hotly, "When your own brother is murdered, Underwood, you don't wait for anything. What have you done about that killing?"

The sheriff waved the pistol. "Get going," he ordered quietly.

Chet turned and walked on toward the jail, hardly conscious, in his anger, of the staring people on the walks. At the door of the jail, Donna Harding confronted him.

"Chet, please understand." Her eyes, as well as her voice, pleaded with him. "You were so angry I was afraid you'd do something crazy."

He shoved on past her and went into the building. Donna looked at Underwood, and the sheriff shook his head, then followed Chet in.

The office was small and musty smelling. In the same room were two barred cells—

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cages, really—that rested on the wooden floor. Chet walked into one without being told, and the door clanked shut behind him. Underwood put the key in his pocket and went to his rolltop desk. He sat in the swivel chair with a sigh and began to leaf through some papers.

Chet sat on the edge of the blanket-covered bunk, his hands dangling between his knees. Presently he raised his head and asked Underwood about the wire he had sent to Lake City. The sheriff told him he was waiting for an answer.

"Then how could you lock me up?" Chet asked angrily, rising to his feet. "You won't even know whether I committed a crime or not until you hear from Lake City."

Underwood turned back to his desk, saying, "I'm running this office, Butler."

Chet grabbed hold of the cell bars and demanded hotly, "Where's my bail, Underwood? You have to set bail."

Underwood shook his head. "Not me. That's up to the judge. He'll hear your case in a day or so. He's not in town just now."

Chet glared at his white-knuckled fists, as if wondering how two hands could be so helpless. Then he dropped them to his sides and sat down again on the edge of the bunk.

SEVERAL hours later, Underwood left his office for supper. When he came back he carried a tray with food for Butler. It was good enough food, but it was tasteless in Chet's mouth, and he ate little. He drank all the hot coffee and put the tray on the floor of the cell, then lay back in the bunk.

All he could think of was Jody. He remembered conversations they'd had, the things they'd laughed at, and each memory heightened the helpless anger inside him.

It seemed like hours that he lay there, but it was still light outside when the little man came into the jail office. He was puffing and panting for breath, his face flushed. He glanced at Chet before he spoke to Underwood, and Chet saw the deputy's star on his shirt front.

"What is it, Dade?" Underwood asked.

The deputy spoke in a high-pitched voice. "Russ Sands is back in town, and he and Quarles are talking lynching. Sands has a big rifle he says is the one that killed Jody Butler. He says he found it at the Butler cabin."

Underwood looked at Chet and asked, "What do you know about that rifle?"

Chet was on his feet by this time. "What do I know about it?" he exclaimed. "How could I know anything about it? I never owned a Sharp's Fifty."

Underwood chewed his lower lip, then said slowly, "Where have I seen a Sharp's rifle?" He shook his head, but the memory wouldn't jog itself into place. He looked at Dade. "Go to the telegraph office, and let me know the minute the wire comes in from Lake City."

Dade nodded, and scooted out again on stubby legs. Down the street, an angry crowd burst from the Elkhorn Saloon, and the sound carried plainly down to the jail. Chet and Underwood listened to the sound. Chet grabbed the bars of the cell.

"You won't be able to stop them Underwood."

The sheriff went to the front window of the jail and peered down the street. He saw Russ Sands leading the angry mob, gesticulating, shouting, his words inflaming them. Law-abiding citizens were being turned into a pack of animals, Underwood thought. He turned toward Chet suddenly.

"What stake does Sands have in all this?" he asked.

"He thinks there's gold on my ranch. He wants to get rid of me." Chet's face tightened as the noise of the crowd surged to a new height. "You know what a crowd like that can do, Underwood. Let me out of here."

"How do I know you won't go wild as soon as I let you out? You've got some idea of who killed Jody." He stepped over to the cell. "You might be wrong."

Chet reached through the bars suddenly and grabbed Underwood's coat by one lapel. "So you'd let them lynch me, because I might do something wrong," he ground out.

The sheriff knocked Chet's hand away and stepped back. As he reached into his pocket for the key to the cell, he said, "I don't like to do this, Butler, but I've got no choice. You get out of town until I have that mob quieted down. Understand?"

The door swung open, and Underwood pointed toward the back door of the jail.

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"That'll take you out into the alley," he told Chet. "You're on your own now. If they see you, you won't have a chance."

"Thanks, Underwood," Chet said, moving off. "I'll give myself up again as soon as it looks safe."

He went out the back and into the alley. The sounds from the street carried over the low building, an angry muttering that had spread through town like a disease.

Chet considered his position as he moved down the alley in the direction of the Elkhorn Saloon. The telegram Underwood was expecting would keep Chet locked up for a good long time, once the sheriff read it. And, being locked up, he could do nothing about finding Jody's killer. From what Chet could see, Underwood was no nearer a solution than he was himself.

It was deep dusk when he reached Second Street, which crossed the alley. The angry crowd was behind him now, but he still had to be careful. Anybody seeing him might raise the alarm.

Second Street was empty, and he sprinted across and entered the alley again. Here there was no fence dividing the alley from the houses on the back street. He moved carefully, knowing that any noise might attract attention from one of the houses, although it was nearly dark now.

He was halfway down the block when a shadowy movement off to his right caught his eyes. He turned and saw a woman watching him, standing in the backyard of a house there.

"Chet," she cried, and he saw that it was Donna.

She ran to him, but stopped a short distance away. "I heard that crowd," she said. "I thought they'd get you."

"Underwood let me out. Where's your brother?"

Her hand went involuntarily to her mouth, and she paled. "What do you want with Dwight?" she cried. "He doesn't know anything about it."

Even in that hurried moment he felt her nearness, but he tried to ignore it. This was the girl who had put him in jail in the first place. He said in a flat voice, "If he doesn't know, he has nothing to worry about."

She said nothing. Chet guessed, "He's at the Elkhorn, isn't he?"

She came closer to him. "Please don't hurt him," she pleaded. "He's all I have, Chet. He's weak, but—"

"I had a brother, too," he reminded her, his voice savage. He started off down the alley.

She said, "I'm going with you."

"No! I'm going alone."

She said, "Listen. The crowd has quieted down. Do you want me to scream?"

He felt a grudging respect for her. It hadn't occurred to him before that she might feel as close to Dwight Harding as he to Jody. He hoped that Dwight had not pulled the trigger of that Sharp's rifle. Without saying more, he moved off down the alley. Donna followed several steps behind.

THEY reached a vacant lot, and Chet crossed it and peered around a building and down the street. Several men stood on the walk, looking toward the crowd in front of the jail. Chet looked up in that direction and saw Underwood on the steps, talking, trying to quiet them down. Donna was close beside him.

"You can't cross the street alone," she told him. "Walk with me and nobody will notice us."

She stepped out onto the walk and he went with her. When they had crossed over he said, "You can't go into the Elkhorn with me."

She turned and looked at him, an unspoken plea in her eyes. She touched his arm for just a moment, then let her hand drop. He wanted to reassure her, but the words wouldn't come. How could he promise anything when he wasn't sure himself?

He left her standing on the walk, and strode rapidly down the narrow space between two buildings. The Elkhorn was three doors up the street. He went rapidly down the alley to the back entrance. As he reached the screen door, he heard voices coming from the storeroom. He flattened against the back wall. The inside door closed, and there was silence again. He stepped into the storeroom.

It was so dark there he could see nothing but a faint slit of light under the other door into the saloon. He walked across the bare

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floor on tiptoe and opened the door a crack.

Immediately, he recognized the thin back of Dwight Harding, at the piano across the room. His fingers were moving over the white and black keys in idle runs and chords. Except for the bartender and the pianist, the big room was empty. Russ Sands had done a good job of recruiting.

Chet had to talk to Dwight, and he shoved the door open. As he took a step into the room, a package of fury jumped onto his back and he stumbled forward, falling to the floor. His assailant grabbed a handful of hair and began to pound Chet's face into the hardwood floor.

Chet felt his lips crack as they smashed into the rough planking. Then, with a cry of rage and pain, he shoved upward and tried to shake the weight from his back. The hold on his hair tightened, and his head was jerked back. Through blurred eyes, he saw the bartender coming toward him with an upraised bottle in his hand. Despite the pain it brought, Chet pulled his head down and shoved to his feet, twisting savagely until his attacker lost his hold.

It was Quarles he faced. At sight of the blood on Chet's lips, a tight smile split Quarles's face. Chet guessed that Quarles had gone into the storeroom to replenish his stock of liquor in anticipation of the surge of drinking that would follow the expected lynching.

From the corner of his eyes Chet saw the bartender slumped against the front of the bar, the bottle he had been carrying at his feet. Dwight Harding stood close by, rubbing the knuckles of his right hand in the palm of his left. At sight of the boy, and with the knowledge of what he'd done, Chet tore into Quarles.

He lashed him with a flicking left that put a cut across Quarles's cheekbone. The smile dropped from the saloon owner's face and he fought back, as Chet pounded him with a hard right. They fought toe to toe for a minute, slugging it out. Quarles stepped back suddenly and kicked with his heavy-soled shoe, aiming for the groin. Chet saw the kick coming and twisted. The shoe slammed painfuly into his thigh muscle, and he fought to keep from going down.

He had to keep his weight on one leg now, and it cut down his effectiveness, but he threw a right and a left at Quarles's stomach and heard the breath whistle from the man. Quarles bent slightly, involuntarily, and Chet slammed a right to his jaw with everything he had. Quarles staggered back a step, and then his legs gave way. He slumped to the floor, unconscious.

Chet limped to the nearest chair and dropped into it. His breath came in labored gasps, and he blinked at the floor until some of his strength returned.

"I think I broke my hand."

Chet looked up at Dwight Harding. The youth held the slender hand before him, where it hung limply.

Chet nodded and said, "Thanks. The bartender would have busted that bottle over my head for sure."

He looked past the youth and saw a large rifle leaning against the front wall of the saloon. He got up and limped to the front of the room, walking past the still-groggy bartender, who followed him with his eyes.

It was the Sharp's Fifty that Russ Sands had claimed he, Chet, had used to kill Jody. Chet picked it up and studied the big gun. It had a thin coating of rust on the outside of the barrel, as if it hadn't been used for some time, but when Chet opened the bolt he saw the gun was loaded.

Turning back with the Sharp's in his hand, his eyes found the youth. Dwight looked frightened, as if he were about to run. Chet limped across the room and stopped in front of Harding. He looked down at the piano player, his eyes boring into the frightened face before him.

"You know who used this on Jody, don't you?" he asked harshly. He nodded toward Quarles's limp form. "Was it him?"

Dwight shook his head and said, "It was Sands."

Chet looked down at the gun and noticed a scratched place on the underside of the barrel. There was also a dent in the wood on the underside of the stock. And he thought he knew where the gun had come from.

"I didn't know Sands had done it until today," Dwight said. "Honest, Mr. Butler. I heard him and Quarles talking just before Sands took that crowd up to the jail. He guessed from some things your brother said

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that you were the one who shot Luke Dore up in Lake City. Sands killed Jody to get him out of the way. Sands believed the stories about gold on your ranch. I think he believed you know where Luke Dore found his gold, and you killed him to keep it secret."

Chet turned the gun over in his hands again. He twisted around and looked at the two nails in the wall just beneath the elk's head. They appeared to be about the correct distance apart to have made the marks on the gun. It seemed so obvious to him now that he felt a little foolish for not having thought of it before. Yet nobody had noticed that the rifle was not in its accustomed place. Or, if they had, they hadn't said anything about it.

The gun had hung above the normal line of sight of anybody at the bar, he noted. He guessed that if he asked ten of the regular patrons of the Elkhorn Saloon, not one of them could tell whether the gun was there or not. Perhaps they wouldn't even remember there had ever been a rifle there!

DWIGHT'S next words jolted him out of his reverie. He said, "Luke Dore was Russ Sands's partner. He was a gambler like Russ, but he thought he could find gold, and he went out prospecting. He claimed that he'd struck it rich and had some samples to prove it, but you shot him before he could tell anybody else where he had found it."

"No wonder," Chet mused. "He must have been the one who found that pocket I showed you. Nobody else would have been fool enough to prospect that park and think he'd found a large deposit."

The youth colored and he said, "It really isn't any good?"

Chet shook his head. "I told you it wasn't." When Dwight looked downcast, Chet added, "I wouldn't have kept it secret for ten years if it had been a rich deposit."

Chet went around behind the bar and clambered up on the shelf that held the many bottles of liquor in front of the large mirror. Reaching as high as he could, he held the rifle up to the nails and compared the marks. They matched, and he felt he had all the proof he needed.

He was climbing down again when the batwings swung open and Sands strode into the room. It took the gambler a second to take the situation in, after he saw Quarles's limp body on the floor. Then he caught sight of Chet and he whirled, his hand streaking for his pistol. Chet tried to bring the big rifle to bear, but it came around too slow. As the pistol in Sands's hand blossomed flame, Chet jumped from the shelf.

He landed painfully on his bruised leg, and dropped on down behind the bar. A long jagged crack spread from the hole where Sands's bullet went through the mirror.

Chet crawled quickly toward the end of the bar, as Sands sent another shot in his direction. He dragged the clumsy rifle after him, for it was the only weapon he had.

At the end of the bar, Chet hesitated. Halfway across the room, Dwight Harding stood white-faced. He saw Chet and then looked back at Sands. Chet moved quietly on out from the end of the bar, intending to show himself suddenly with the rifle. It was a poor chance, but about the only thing he could do. And he hadn't forgotten that the rifle he held had killed Jody or that Sands was the murderer.

Dwight's eyes grew wider as he understood what Chet was about to do. Suddenly he cried, "Over here, Sands."

In that moment, Chet leaped out, swinging the rifle around. Sands jerked his eyes toward Dwight for a moment, then turned back. The Sharp's roared just an instant before the pistol in Sands's grip jumped in explosion.

The forty-five slug missed, but the rifle shot didn't. The heavy lead caught Sands in the chest. The force of it knocked him backward off his feet, and he slid when he hit the floor, his pistol clattering down beside him.

Chet stood weakly, looking at the dead man, the rifle held at arms' length in front of him. Quarles stirred and groaned, but there was no fight left in him. Chet felt the throbbing in the wound in his chest, and he wondered vaguely whether it would hold. Donna Harding rushed into the saloon, but still he stood, as if waiting for the tissue of the wound to let go. It held, and he slowly set the rifle on top of the bar.

Donna looked from one to the other of them.

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Finally, she raced across the room and came into Chet's arms. "Thank heaven you're all right," she breathed.

Underwood followed Donna into the saloon, his face flushed with running. He looked at Sands and the reviving Quarles. "I thought I told you to get out of town, Butler," he said, but there was no real anger in his voice. That came next, and it put a hard edge to his words.

"You took the law into your own hands. You'd better hope you have witnesses to prove you shot in self-defense." He paused, looking about the room. "I remembered where I'd seen that old Sharp's after you left, Butler. I see you found it."

Chet nodded. "It's the one that hung over the bar, Sheriff. I compared the marks." His face took on a sheepish look. "I thought you weren't interested in finding Jody's killer, Underwood. I see I was wrong."

The sheriff fished in one of the pockets of his coat and drew out a piece of paper. "I got an answer to my wire," he said. "It seems the coroner's jury found that you shot in self-defense up there in Lake City."

"What about that other charge you were holding me on?" Chet asked.

Underwood feigned ignorance. He said, "What other charge? I was just holding you for safekeeping. I had an idea that Sands was behind all the trouble around here, but I needed time to gather proof."

Chet looked down at Donna. "Your brother saved my life," he told her. "If he hadn't shouted for Sands's attention, I'd probably be the one on the floor, instead of the gambler."

She turned and looked at her brother, and he came slowly across the room. He held out his hand and said, "It's broken, sis. I can't play the piano any more."

Suddenly that mountain ranch seemed to be inviting Chet to come back. He said, "Maybe you won't have to play for a living any more." Both Dwight and Donna looked at him. "I'll need another man on my ranch. We'll have to build a house, a bigger one this time." He looked down at Donna. "I'll need you, too."

She nodded her head, and the three of them moved toward the doors of the Elkhorn Saloon.

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MARY ANN KNEW one thing, and she had to make Webb see it . . .

that if he caught the horse, he'd find another faraway dream to chase

WEBB HYATT rode into town the morning after the stallion had been seen coming down from the high ridge country into the valleys where mares were to be had for the taking. He'd posted a hundred dollar reward for the horse last year, but no one had succeeded in catching it. He was beginning to get impatient for the time when the sleek black stallion would wear the Dipper brand, so now he was raising the reward to two hundred.

He dismounted hurriedly and his boots, scuffed, dusty, brisk on the plank sidewalk, reflected a man who worked hard. He'd spent nights on the Dipper verandah, propped against an upright, dead asleep because he'd been too tired to stumble across the doorstill. But in ten years he'd built the Dipper into the second largest ranch in Davis County.

He went into O'Brien's saloon, where O'Brien's bald head gleamed like the glasses on the shelves behind him. Len Rice and Grant Coombs from the Circledot and Jake Jensen from the Wagonwheel turned from the bar at his approach.

"The stallion's back," Webb said briefly. "Jim Donovan saw him last night at sundown in the hills west of his place. Shake out your loops, boys. There's two hundred dollars in cash waiting for the man that snubs him to the post in the Dipper home corral."

Grant Coombs made a hacking sound and set his glass on the bar. "Two hundred dollars!"

Len Rice eyed Webb curiously. "How come you figure the stallion's worth that much money?"

"Alone, he isn't. But the foals he'd sire would provide a ranch with the best remuda in the county."

"How big do you reckon he is?"

"Seventeen hands. He's fast too." Webb had seen the stallion running ten mares in front of him last year, and the horse had covered ground with the ease of an antelope.

O'Brien, polishing a glass, said pointedly, "You can't tell, Hyatt. You haven't been that close. The only one that has is Bill Turner,

KILLER

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It has come to this — a choice between Mary Ann and the stallion. . . .

STALLION

By M. E. BRADSHAW

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Webb's mouth thinned. O'Brien liked to throw it up to him that Bill Turner had been killed trying to bring in the stallion after Webb had posted the hundred dollar reward last year. He said quietly, "Turner had a frayed hondo on his rope, and you know it. He had no business going after any horse with a rope like that."

O'Brien said heavily, "It wasn't the rope that trampled Turner to death, Hyatt."

Webb held his temper. "All right, O'Brien. You're bound you're going to believe the stallion deliberately trampled Turner. Go ahead and believe it, then."

Grant Coombs stirred uneasily. "What's your opinion, Webb?"

Webb answered shortly, because the marks of vicious teeth on the neck and ears of Turner's horse had been evidence enough for him. But apparently there were grown men who preferred an old wives' tale of a man-killing stallion.

"Turner either fell or was thrown when the hondo broke. The stallion went after Turner's horse, not Turner. Both horses trampled him in the fight, not just the stallion."

"Hyatt," O'Brien said, "when a horse steps on a man's skull, you can't tell whether that horse was wearing a shoe or not. You're guessing there was a fight between Turner's horse and the stallion."

"Am I?" Webb faced him over the bar, wanting to reach across it and knock some sense into the man's head. "Who chewed up Turner's horse's neck and ears, then? You, O'Brien?"

O'Brien backed down grudgingly. "Maybe you're right, but nobody knows for sure. They won't either, until somebody else gets a rope on that stallion."

Webb dismissed him sourly. If O'Brien talked enough, there wouldn't be a man left who'd go after the horse. He eyed the men at the bar. "Two hundred dollars for the horse, boys. And I want him sound in wind and limb. No scars from loaded quirts, either."

Jake Jensen asked mildly, "You going after him yourself, Webb?"

Webb flushed. He said angrily, "Sure, I've got nothing else to do, Jake. Dipper steers turn back when they get to the end of Dipper grass. They brand themselves, too." He wheeled from the bar, then halted. It wasn't a matter of paying other men to do a job he wouldn't do himself, and they knew it. He only wished he could afford two or three days from the Dipper to stick to the stallion's heels.

He told the four men evenly, "If he comes within a quarter mile of where I am, I'll go after him. Anything outside of that isn't worth it to me. It gives him too big a start and only wastes my time."

He left the saloon, fuming. He felt he was justified in posting that reward so other men would chase the stallion for him. It was his own personal sweat that had made the Dipper the second biggest ranch in the county. And when a man's time started to count for more than his money, he'd earned the right to make his money work for him.

He crossed the street to the newspaper office to order a half-dozen new handbills advertising the reward, to replace the old ones tacked up around town. He came out with a stubborn set to his jaw, which slackened to surprise as he came face to face with a stocky, sandy-haired man in a tweed business suit.

"McQuarry! You weren't due to pick up your beef for another month."

"Sorry, Hyatt, but it couldn't be helped," McQuarry said. He was a cattle buyer for a Chicago packing house. "The buyers in Boston put the date ahead, not us. Can I have the beef in a week?"

Webb said thinly, "If you want lean beef, you can have it tomorrow."

MCQUARRY'S chuckle held surprised coolness, and Webb read his thought. If we can't have yours, and fat, we'll have someone elses. McQuarry said, "We'd like it fat, Hyatt. We can give you a week to get it."

"All right," Webb said. "It'll be at the railroad pens a week from today. You can pick it up there."

McQuarry regarded him steadily. "I told Grady in Chicago we could count on you."

Webb searched his face, seeking a barb in the woods. He didn't find one. Eight years ago, with seventy poor Dipper steers eating leased grass, he'd have worn a boyish grin of pleasure at the compliment. Now, he wasn't sure he liked it.

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He turned away without thanking McQuarry. It would take Dipper's five-man crew the rest of the day and all of tomorrow to put two hundred steers in the lush grass of Bent Knife Basin for fattening. He walked to his horse and swung into the saddle. By sundown only a quarter of the distance to the basin would be covered, which meant an overnight bedding ground, night guards, a full-fledged camp.

He rode out of town frowning. He wished he hadn't promised Mary Ann so wholeheartedly that he would take her to the party at Wagonwheel tonight. She'd made a new dress for it, and he uneasily foresaw her disappointment when he told her he'd be camped somewhere in Blue Water Valley with McQuarry's steers instead.

Mary Ann was Jim Donovan's niece. She'd come to live with Jim five years ago, a thin, long-legged tomboy of fifteen, Indian-like with her healthy brown skin and thick dark braids hanging to her waist. Jim's small ranch bordered Dipper on the south, and when Mary Ann ran out of work on Jim's place she'd ride to Dipper to help them out. Webb patiently chased her from his branding-fires and his horses and even his cookshack. Then one day Mary Ann was eighteen and Jim gave her a birthday party. Webb was there, but he couldn't remember much about it because a sudden realization came on him and laid him flat. He realized he'd spent the evening covertly eyeing his future wife.

That had been two years ago. Now, remembering the threats to Dipper that had twice prevented the wedding—the sullen roaring grass-fire, then the whispered rumor of foot-and-mouth disease—he thought fervently, thank goodness she understands. Well, the wedding would be soon now; the books of Dipper had been in good solid black for the first time last fall. Still, he'd put the profits back into the ranch, which left the bank account as lean as ever. A thousand dollars was a respectable figure. He told himself, after fall roundup next year, there'll be a thousand dollars. That's when the wedding will be.

He reined up at the fork in the road in the flat open sweep of Porcupine Valley, looking toward the tiny fringe of treetops marking the creek, four miles distant, which ran through Jim's home ranch. He could ride to Jim's now to tell Mary Ann, or he could swing north through the low grassy hills to Dipper to get the crew started on cutting out McQuarry's beef. If he helped with the cutting out, he couldn't get back to Jim's before sundown. It would be short notice for calling it off; she'd be dressed and ready to go. Still, he decided to come back: He couldn't risk the market for two hundred steers by letting them lose a single day in the basin. And everything he did for Dipper he did for Mary Ann.

The peaks af the Sierras rose mistily beyond the foothills west of Jim's place, and his gaze lingered hungrily on the low green ridges where Jim had seen the stallion. No telling where he was now; munching Dipper grass, maybe. Well Webb hoped he enjoyed it. It was going to be his regular diet one af these days. He spurred the sorrel toward the nearby hills and Dipper. When he recrossed the hills and loped steadily for Jim's place that evening, the valley was filled with shadows. But the cutting out was finished and the beef was moving toward the basin. He'd overtake the herd somewhere in Blue Water Valley tonight, if he could fight fatigue that long. He tied his blowing horse in front on the neat log house and crossed the veranda, railing at himself for the small sense of guilt he had no reason to feel.

When he entered, Mary Ann had just lit the lamp in the parlor, and it wasn't entirely the new dress that halted his step on the floor. And he suddenly hated McQuarry's steers, because her quick welcoming smile was fading to silent troubled thoughtfulness as she noticed his shabby working boots and pants and coarse wool shirt.

"I'm sorry, honey." He winched inwardly, knowing he'd worn the words threadbare. He glanced at Jim, a tall spare man with thinning gray hair and a weathered friendly face. The lines around his mouth showed the strain of nine years of putting up with a leg crushed by a broomtail's thrashing forehoofs.

"Howdy, Webb," Jim said.

Webb crossed to Marry Ann and took her hands, and told her about McQuarry's beef. She seemed strangely unmoved, and annoyance that might not have come, if he hadn't been hungry and tired, rose in him. He finish-

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ed irritably, "Those steers have to go into the basin tomorrow, Mary Ann. That's all there is to it."

Mary Ann said quietly, "All right, Webb." She lowered her head and fingered the doily on the table, then met his eyes squarely. "I wanted to talk to you about something at the party tonight, but we can talk about it now. It won't wait, Webb."

Whatever it was, she'd talked it over with Jim. That much he knew, because Jim left his chair and went into the kitchen.

"Webb," Mary Ann said, "I want you to withdraw the reward for the stallion."

Webb fell back a step, amazed. "What? Why, Mary Ann?"

"Because men who aren't fit for it are going to go after the stallion for the reward, that's why. Two hundred dollars in the pocket of a small rancher is a lot of money, and all small ranchers aren't able-bodied men. Uncle Jim isn't."

"Jim?" His voice rose. This was Turner and his frayed rope all over again. Except now it was Jim Donovan with his bad leg. And a man needed two good legs to hug his horse's belly with when a half ton of wild stallion was fighting his loop. Webb shouted, "Jim's got more sense than to go after that horse with a leg like his!"

"Has he, Webb?" Mary Ann asked. "He's been spending that two hundred dollars all day."

WEBB studied her face. She meant it, which meant that Jim did too. He strode to the kitchen door and jerked it open. "Jim, for heaven's sake! Have you gone crazy?"

Jim said amiably, "I'd sure like a new saddle. I'm getting tired of mending cinch straps every time my horse breathes deep. I'd like a new stove for the parlor too."

"Great day!" Webb shouted. "And you'd use a saddle with busted, mended cinch straps that would snap at the first dally you took around the saddlehorn!"

"Calm yourself," Jim said. "I'd use Mary Ann's saddle. It's a double rig, sound as a dollar. It was her father's, you know."

"Mary Ann's saddle," Webb said bleakly, "isn't going to give you another leg, Jim."

Jim shuffled to the window and looked out, musing. "Time was when a fine horse like that wouldn't have set foot on my land without getting the JD brand on his hide. Now—" He sighed gently. "I can't use the horse, but I can use the money. If he shows up in the hills again, I aim to catch him."

"Jim!" Webb pleaded.

Jim said shortly, "It's reasonable. I'm not fool enough to chase him half around the country. But like I said, if he comes back this way, I'm not sitting on my hands and watching him go by like I did last night. My leg isn't that bad, Webb. I've never fallen out of a saddle yet."

Webb said evenly, "If he's running mares, he'll be mean as blazes."

"If he's running mares, they'll slow him down so I can get on his tail."

Webb stormed from the kitchen. Mary Ann waited in the parlor, but he wouldn't look at her. He'd dreamed of planting the Dipper iron on the stallion's black shoulder once too often to call it quits, even for Jim's sake. He stepped to the door, crossed the verandah, and climbed on his horse.

He'd thought better of Jim, thought he had more sense. Mary Ann came out, and Webb held up. It wasn't in him to ride off like this. But he wasn't going to withdraw the reward, either. He spoke testily into the shadows of the verandah.

Mary Ann moved down the steps. "Uncle Jim knows you, Webb. He said you wouldn't withdraw the reward."

"It's not me Jim knows—it's horses. So do you, Mary Ann." She'd caught and broken a half-dozen wild colts for some of the neighboring ranchers, and she'd chosen them herself for intelligence and stamina. Exasperated, he added, "Can you give me one good reason why I shouldn't have that horse?"

Her face was a small white oval of earnestness in the dark. "It isn't just the stallion, Webb."

He straightened up, sighing. "What else, then?"

"Whatever you want next. You'll set your heart on it like you did on the stallion. And I'm beginning to be afraid, Webb, you won't care how you get it."

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"What?" His voice scaled up with surprise, but a search of her face told him she meant it. He said evenly, "Mary Ann, I didn't make people fools. If they choose to put a loop on that horse when they or their gear aren't fit, that's not my fault."

"It's only that I love you, Webb. I don't like to see you set a lot of store by things that don't really count."

He didn't like that. After they were married, she'd be telling him the Dipper didn't need this or that because it didn't really count.

He said crisply, "The stallion counts to me, Mary Ann. He's the best-looking horse I've ever seen."

Mary Ann blinked. She's going to cry, Webb thought tiredly. She said in a small voice, "And you won't change your mind, Webb?"

"No, I won't. There's not enough reason to." He'd softened the answer as much as he could, but he knew from her face that it still hurt. Remorse pricked him, and he leaned down to pat her cheek. "Cheer up, now. Jim won't go after the horse. He's just talking. You'll see."

She didn't believe it. Well, he wasn't so sure of it himself. He thought with annoyance, Jim of all people! He had worries enough without Jim acting up; O'Brien's scaring off good men with his talk of a killer stallion, then McQuarry's beef, now this. And if he didn't get to the herd before sunup, he'd get no sleep tonight.

He squeezed Mary Ann's cold little hand and said a hasty good-by. Heading briskly toward the valley, he found comfort in the thought, she's a good, sensible girl; if anybody can talk Jim out of it, she can.

He found the camp at the base of the hills on the west side of Blue Water Valley, and his experienced eye ran over the herd a half mile below the camp. Except for one or two animals, they were bedded down and quiet. Two mounted figures slowly circled the herd; that would be Warren and Hardy on night guard. He dismounted stiffly at the campfire. Abe Ellis moved toward him from the shadow of trees and brush, and spoke worriedly.

"The remuda's restless, Webb. That stallion's been snooping around here all night."

"No!"

Webb's pulse rose as his eyes went to the dark wooded hills above the camp. That was where he'd be, wary, high headed, waiting the chance to steal the mares in the remuda. It was a challenge Webb hated to let go, but his sorrel had been pushed to the limit and his own legs were all but buckling with lack of sleep. And to get a rope on that stallion called for a good clear head

He forgot it regretfully, and glanced at the two blanketed figures on the ground. "You alone on the remuda?" he asked Abe.

"Yes."

"Well, keep your eyes open. Give me a couple of hours' sleep and I'll relieve you."

"Right."

ABE moved back to the remuda. Webb wearily picketed the sorrel and spread his bedroll. Mary Ann's small con-

SPOUSE GROUSE

By S. OMAR BARKER

For a new garage or a pantry shelf,
The fashion today is "do-it-yourself."
My wife has the bug. I wouldn't much rue it
If I could just leave it to "herself" to do it!

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cerned face haunted him as he fell asleep, and his last conscious thought was a weary protesting—not Jim Donovan.

He couldn't tell how long he'd slept when he woke to the sounds of animal unrest. Abe's voice bawled from the darkness, "Remuda's going! Hit the saddle!"

He srtuggled to stand up, still stupified with sleep, seeing the forms of Hinman and Riley fling off their blankets and come to their feet, running, shouting. His own boots struck out clumsily for the sorrel, rearing against the picket fifty feet from the campfire. He freed the reins, mounted, and sent the sorrel plunging past the fire and through the brush after the scattering remuda.

Once in the saddle, his head cleared. Already he'd begun to shake out his rope. The stallion wouldn't get away this time. Even jaded as the sorrel was, he could do it. The stallion was on the far side of the remuda, using it as a barrier between himself and the camp. Webb swung the sorrel around the drag of the remuda and lined it up with the racing black shape, three hundred feet ahead.

The stallion was working hard to keep his prize, urging the remuda down the slope toward the valley floor. The cattle began to mill, and Webb knew Warren and Hardy were barely holding the herd. The gap between the sorrel and the stallion had closed by fifty feet when Webb overtook Abe, who was riding hard, nursing his rifle. Webb had pulled a little ahead when he saw from the tail of his eye that Abe was leveling the rifle.

Webb didn't need to look twice. Abe was drawing a bead on the stallion. There wasn't even time to shout at him. Webb pulled hard on the sorrel's reins, throwing it into the path of Abe's horse, hearing the solid slap of flesh as the horses collided shoulder to shoulder. Abe's horse fell, spilling him from the saddle and sending the rifle spinning from his hand.

Webb slid from the sorrel's back. He was shaking with rage. The foremost horses in the remuda had thundered onto the valley floor. They'd get away now, but that didn't matter as much as the stallion's getting away. Abe had picked himself up, and Webb hit him in the mouth. Abe stumbled back.

Webb stood over him and said thickly, "Don't ever do that again, Ellis. You hear me?"

Abe stared up from the ground, amazed and shaken. "But he was taking the remuda! It'll take days to round 'em up in these hills."

Webb said heavily, "Thanks to you, Abe. Now the whole shooting match has gotten away—stallion, remuda and all."

He knew how he wanted to finish up—you're fired. But he couldn't spare the man, out here in the hills with McQuarry's beef on his hands and no mounts for the crew.

Abe's lip was bleeding, and he wiped it with the corner of his neckerchief. Webb turned away from him and looked down the slope. The last of the remuda was flying past the restless frightened herd into the valley bottom. The stallion was beside them, neck arched, tail straight out, handsome, wily, all but invisible in the distance. Webb's hands clenched with the intensity of his will. He'd never wanted anything for the Dipper more than he wanted that stallion.

Behind him, Abe got to his feet. His voice came guardedly. "They say that horse is a killer, Webb."

Webb's anger had left him spent. He had no strength to tell Abe that if it were true, the stallion would have trampled Abe when he was on foot at the remuda. He satisfied himself with a weary, "Hogwash," and walked to the sorrel. Warren and Hardy, he knew, had done a first-rate job of holding the herd while the remuda was stamping past them not more than seventy yards away. He'd see to it there was an extra ten apiece in their pay next month.

He recalled them from the herd. They'd had enough for one night. Hinman and Riley went out to relieve them, and Webb and Abe wearily rolled into their blankets. There was no need for a camp guard now, Webb had decided tiredly; there was nothing left to guard.

They started the search for the horses at sunup, on the four mounts left. The men, Web knew, were cursing the stallion heartily, but he wasn't. The stallion had out-foxed them, out-run them, beaten them all around. In spite of the fact that Webb knew there were mares in the remuda he'd never see

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again, he couldn't withhold his admiration for the horse.

They had recovered four of the horses by noon, and Webb called a halt. They could get the beef to the basin now. They ate hard-tack and jerked beef, then changed mounts and got the herd moving.

The moon was rising when they reached Bent Knife Basin that night. At daylight the next morning, Webb left Hinman and Riley with the herd and he, Warren, Hardy and Abe rode for the Dipper, stopping to comb the brush for more of the runaway horses. When they'd picked up four more, they kept steadily to the trail. The rest of the horses, Webb acknowledged out of fairness to the crew, would have to be let go until the men had had a good hot meal and a decent night's sleep at the home ranch.

Late that afternoon Webb found himself riding beside Abe. He studied Abe covertly, reflecting that when he'd first hired him seven years ago, nothing under the sun could have induced him to hit him. Well, maybe it wouldn't hurt to apologize. He considered it, then wrote the incident off with the thought, the stallion wasn't around then.

The shadows were climbing the hills when they neared Porcupine Valley and Dipper. Webb wondered if the stallion had come back through the valley with his mares. They'd seen no tracks, but Webb would have been surprised if they had. The stallion was too cunning to run in the center of the valley, where man's scent had tainted the trails. He'd keep high on the valley sides, in the cover of brush and gully.

If he had come back this way, he'd have crossed Jim's land. Webb swallowed. He thought he'd faced up honestly to the consequences of Jim's going after the horse, but it seemed he hadn't. There was a knot in his stomach, and his hands were cold. He didn't want Jim to go after that horse. He liked Jim too well, liked him as a neighbor, a friend, and a future uncle-in-law. If anything happened to Jim, Webb's conscience would whisper for the rest of his life.

HE GLIMPSED Jim's place through a break in the hills and his eyes probed into the distance. He made out the steady column of smoke from the chimney. It reassured him. If anything had gone wrong at Jim's place, Mary Ann wouldn't be wasting time with a supper fire.

Webb felt better then. The hill rose to block the view, and he settled back in the saddle. He'd go see Jim tonight, talk to him, reason with him. If he had to, he'd even buy him that saddle and stove to keep him out of mischief. But the reward for the stallion stayed. With it still in force, there'd be maybe twenty men trying to catch the stallion. With only himself and his crew, there'd be six at most.

He could stop worrying about McQuarry's beef, too. There'd be a tidy profit when the sale was made, and it would go into the bank toward the thousand dollars Webb wanted to have before he took on a family. He frowned, and wiped grit from his face with his neckerchief. He hadn't mentioned to Mary Ann his wanting to wait for the thousand dollars, but she'd accept it because it was sensible. That was Mary Ann; under her pixie-like ways, she was a good, sensible girl.

He smiled slowly with a sudden pleasant thought. Mary Ann had little enough as a young girl, but that would change when she was mistress of Dipper.

Twilight was mantling the hills when they came in sight of the Dipper buildings. They filed through the gate toward the main house and bunkhouse, dispirited and drained of strength. The Chinese cook came out of the cookshack, waving his arms and talking in an excited spate of dialect.

Webb couldn't make out what the cook was saying. He was probably put out because he'd have to fall to and rustle up supper for the men on short notice. Warren and Hardy dismounted in front of the bunkhouse, and Abe took the reins to feed and water the horses. Webb rode on toward the house, wondering what ailed the cook to make him dance along beside the horse like a monkey on a string.

When he rounded the corner of the bunkhouse, he could see the main corral. He knew then what ailed the cook. A powerful black horse snorted and plunged in fury in the stout log enclosure, rearing to paw with

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long reaching forelegs at the rope that held him to the stake. Somebody'd brought in the stallion.

Webb hauled his sorrel up short. "Hardy! Warren!" he roared. In the sweetness of the moment he even forgave Abe. "Abe! Look what's here!"

He spurred the sorrel across the empty yard. Whoever'd brought the stallion in had gone, but the cook would tell him who it was. Webb wanted to shake the man's hand; he'd proved the horse was no killer. And two hundred well-earned dollars of Dipper's money was waiting for him.

Webb dismounted at the corral and feasted his eyes on the stallion. He'd never seen anything like it; the spirit and physical strength of the animal brought a grin to his face. Wall-eyed, the stallion screamed his rage. Webb mounted the logs of the corral for a better look.

Abe, Warren and Hardy came on the run and joined him. Webb was gratified, listening to the unstinting praise of the men for the horse. He was pleased with Abe's generouse, "Sure is a mighty fine animal, Webb!"

Then something moved in the corral to Webb's right, taking his eyes from the stallion. He thought at first it was a bundle of old clothes that had been dropped inside the fence, until it stood up stiffly. Webb froze, his fingers digging like a terrified cat's into the log he was straddling.

Mary Ann's small straight figure moved along the logs toward him. He slid stupified from the fence. She'd worn a leather mackinaw and chaps, so clawing brambles couldn't fasten into the cloth and unseat her. Her hair had been looped into a compact knot to keep it out of the reach of low branches. The precautions made little difference to Webb. He stood stricken, listening to her boots swishing through the corral's loose earth. The men stopped talking and stared open-mouthed.

Mary Ann took off a rope-scarred leather glove and thrust out a small dusty hand. "I want my two hundred dollars."

She blinked back tears, and swallowed. She'd lost her hat, and the tight knot of hair was coming loose. There'd been a jackpine branch she hadn't seen—or else the stallion had dragged her into it. The needles had left a ladder across her cheek, and Webb's own skin stung as he sensed the impact of that branch.

He dragged his eyes from her and looked at the stallion. His mouth was dry when his eyes came back to her, and he wet his lips to get the question out. "How did you do it?"

The lift of her chin was defiant. "I just snubbed the rope around the saddlehorn, and Ben did the rest." Ben was her big roan gelding. Her lips trembled, and the corners of her mouth turned down. "Give me my two hundred dollars."

So it had come to this, an out-and-out choice between Mary Ann and the stallion—if for no better reason than because a man couldn't have his neighbors saying behind their hands that his wife had roped the stallion he rode. But there was a better reason, and he knew it.

She'd wanted him to face that choice, because until he did, he'd never know how little he could care about the stallion, when it was measured pound for pound with her. Or, for that matter, with Jim, or even Turner. He could still blame Turner's death on his own foolishness, but he couldn't write him off because of it. If he did, he'd be obliged to write off everyone who acted foolishly under the stimulus of a sizable reward. And he couldn't write off people and keep his self-respect.

The thought went briefly through his head and, now that it was settled, he could deal with the towering anger that came on the heels of relief. He said to Mary Ann, "I've got a good notion of what I'd like to give you!"

He marched to the men lining the fence, and spoke crisply. "Give me your hunting knife, Stan."

Warren gave him the knife, and Webb approached the stallion warily. He shouted, "Open the gates!" and moved in to slice swiftly at the tightening rope as the stallion reared away.

He'd only partially cut the rope, but the horse's weight broke the remaining strands. Webb noted with regretful pride that the stallion didn't need a second look to find the

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gate. Mane and tail flying, he streaked through it, flashed across the yard, and sailed over a four-foot fence. Webb's eyes followed him until he disappeared into a nearby ravine. Then he walked briskly back to the corral fence.

He gave Stan the knife and said quietly, "That settles that, fellows. If I ever ride that horse, I'll rope him myself."

He had unfinished business with Mary Ann. For a sensible girl, she'd taken the most reckless way he could think of to teach him a lesson. She'd cried a little while he'd been cutting the horse loose; there was a clean track down each dusty cheek that hadn't been there before.

He said briefly, "No more reward. It's withdrawn as of now."

"I want my money, Webb Hyatt!"

Fresh anger warmed the back of his neck. He said gruffly, "Jim'll get the money. He'll need it. He'll have to buy a new suit if he's going to give you away. The check from McQuarry's beef'll take care of your wedding dress, and anything else you need, too."

"Webb! You mean—"

"Yes, I mean. About the middle of the week after next."

He watched her face closely. He found delight in it, but no surprise. She didn't even pretend to be surprised. He pushed his hat back and grinned, while she hugged him gleefully. A sensible girl? He'd underestimated her. Smart was the word. And smart she had had to be, to get the better of that stallion.

KNOW YOUR WEST

1. The Gallatin, Madison, and Beaverhead Rivers, rising in and near Yellowstone Park, come together in Montana to form what large and famous Western river?

2. To what do the names Mandens, Nez Percés, Hunkpapas, Papagos, Mescaleros and Gros Ventres refer?

3. In cowboy talk, "to snail" and "to snake" mean the same thing. What?

4. What did the oldtimers means by "the gunman's sidewalk?"

5. In what Northwestern territory, now a state, occurred the battles or fights with Indians that became known as Wolf Mountain, Rosebud, Little Big Horn, Lame Deer, Hayfield, Two Moon's Village and Chief Joseph's Last Fight?

6. If you heard an oldtime cowboy say "the range boss sure read me the Scriptures," what would he mean?

7. How could a scout or another Indian tell at a glance from some distance whether a teepee village belonged to the Crow or the Sioux tribe?

8. What were the stockades of frontier trading posts often called even when in no way connected with the military?

9. In cowboy language, "taking to the tules" means going into hiding or on the dodge. How is this Spanish word pronounced and what does it mean?

10. Buffalo hide hunters considered about how many killed buffalos as a fair minimum quota for two professional skinners to skin per day: 15, 20, 25, 30, or 40?

——*Rattlesnake Robert*

You will find the answers to these questions on page 79. Score yourself 2 points for each question you answer correctly. 20 is a perfect score. If your total is anywhere from 16 to 20, you're well acquainted with the customs and history of the cow country. If your total score is anywhere from 8 to 14, you will have things to learn. If you're below 8, better get busy polishing up your knowledge of the West.

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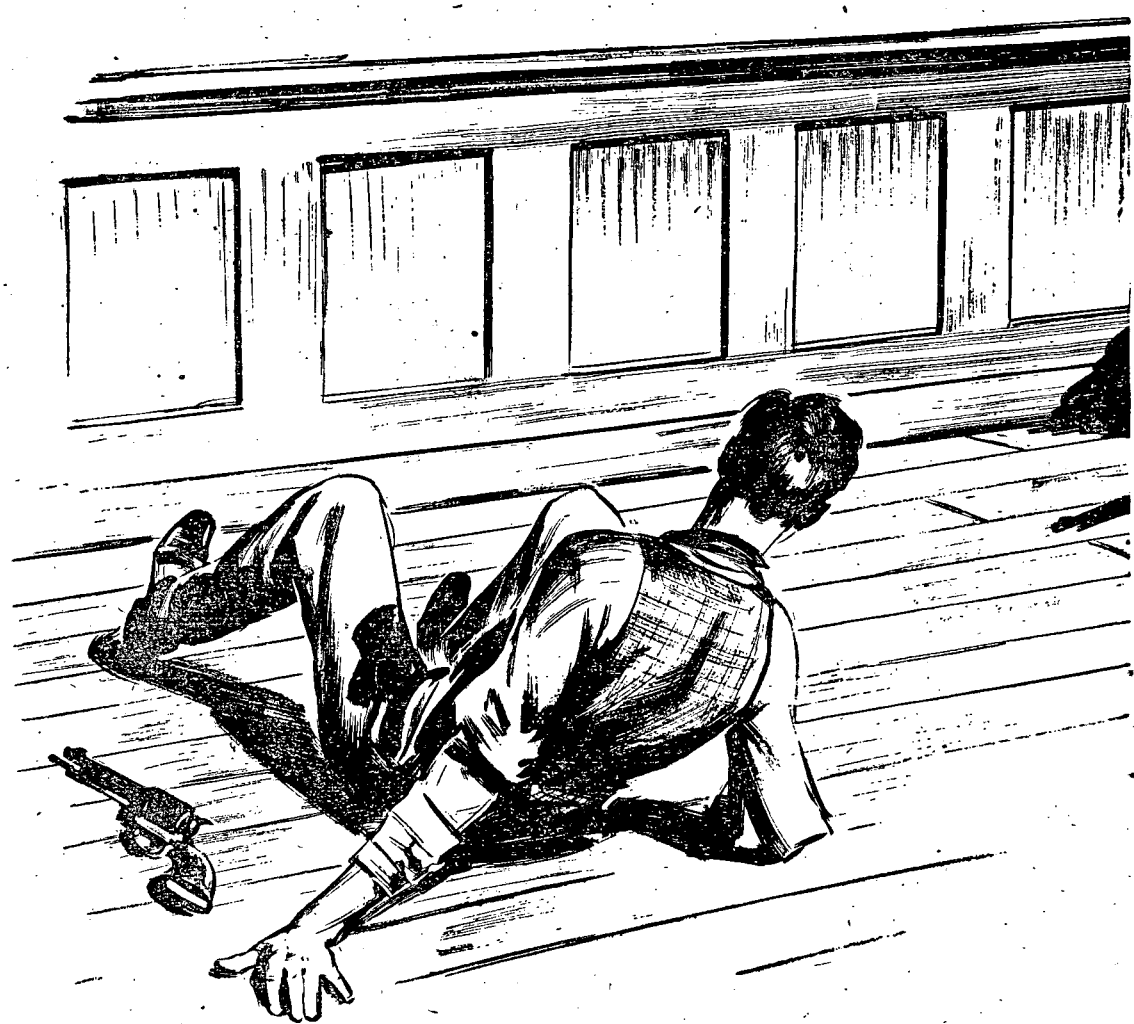
FURY
at CARBINE CREEK

by JOHN JAKES



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BLANEY KNEW the danger of getting mixed up with other people's troubles . . . but it was hard to stay away from a girl like Caroline

THE swaying Concord lurched into the yard as the driver gave a final blaring toot to the horn. A pair of raggedy boys slammed out the front door of the rude frame building, yelling raucous greetings to the leather-faced shotgun guard. The horses stamped and blew loudly, and the coach rocked gently to a stop on its braces.

The yard of the way station became a bustling hub of activity. An old man with a bottle of red eye in one

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fist hobbled from the direction of the stables and began a loud conversation with the driver, who had just climbed down.

A fat black-haired Mexican woman, grinning amply, came through the lamp-lit doorway of the building and cried hoarsely, "Come een, come een! Food and a bed!"

Blaney Carr brushed some of the dust from the sleeve of his black coat and shook his head, smiling at the young woman seated across from him. It had been a long hot ride from San Antonio, and he was thankful for the evening, the lemon-and-purple sky set here and there with the first brilliant white stars.

"Well, miss," he said to the girl, "I think we cant rest for a while now."

The girl—for she was hardly more than that, despite the firm outlines of a womanly body under the dusty blue silk gown—smiled her response from glowing blue eyes. Her traveling companion, on the other hand, Blaney reflected, did not seem to care for an exchange of pleasantries. The moon-faced frowning woman, whom the girl had called Aunt Ella, frowned openly at Blaney. He smiled again, this time to himself, and pushed open the coach door. He helped Caroline Hastings down with a firm hand on her elbow.

That was all Blaney knew about her, her name. That she and her aunt were traveling to Carbine Creek from San Antonio seemed to be tacitly understood. True to form, Blaney had told her only his name, and had passed the rest of the sun-blazing wearisome day talking about random subjects.

Blaney was able to carry on a spirited conversation, but he did not fool himself into believing that he would get very far socially if the truth about him were known—that he was a professional trick-shot artist. But, of course, it would come out once he played the engagement in Carbine Creek on the following evening.

Aunt Ella climbed wheezingly out of the coach, made a comment about the dirtiness of the two urchins arguing about something less than a foot away, and tilted her nose to indicate disapproval. For the hell of it, Blaney took a coin from his checked vest and scaled it toward the boys. He watched the ensuing scramble with amused eyes.

"Will you dine with us this evening, Mr. Carr?" Caroline Hastings asked. "Since we are the only three passengers, I think we should stick together."

"I'm sure Mr. Carr would prefer to dine at his leisure," Aunt Ella said quickly. "I'd like to spend some time taking a bath."

"I'm afraid baths'll be rather scarce here, ma'am," Blaney said.

He felt a twinge of regret. Something in Caroline Hastings's sprightly clean-scrubbed face appealed to him. He took quick hold of his emotions, though. From town to town and show to show, a man just naturally got lonesome, but Blaney had long made it a policy to avoid entanglements of any sort. He had seen too much of this rough raw land west of St. Louis and the Mississippi not to know that entanglements of any sort often brought violence.

Not that Blaney considered himself a coward. It was merely that he had learned a bitter lesson during his boyhood in Alton. His father, employed in a local brewery, had taken to gambling with some of his friends. Two of them had gotten in debt, and had made a desperate try for the brewery payroll. Blaney remembered vividly the black rainy night when the brewery watchman had killed his father with an old single-shot rifle.

All through the war years, Blaney had seen it too. Men who got mixed up with anything, wives or cards or a miltary career, always ended up bad. Blaney wanted nothing more than freedom and peace, after the cannonading hell of the battle fields. He felt that he had found peace now; but sometimes it presented problems.

He watched Caroline Hastings and her aunt vanish inside the station, hardly aware that he had spoken a farewell. Shrugging, he turned and retrieved the two suitcases which the driver had slung unceremoniously into the dust. He had picked up the bags and started toward the door when he heard a rattle of hoofs down the rutted road.

Curious, he turned and watched the two men ride in on lathered mounts. One was stocky and brutal looking. The other, younger, with a matted blond beard, swore rapidly at his horse as he kicked him to a stop. Blaney appraised them swiftly, seeing the

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vicious gleam of their eyes in the glow of the coach lanterns. He saw that they wore guns like professionals. Blaney felt a faint creeping at the bottom of his spine.

Somehow, he thought, I'm going to have something to do with these men. He had felt the same sensation when Caroline Hastings had responded to his greeting that morning in the coach. Blaney didn't like the thought any more than he liked the looks of the two men.

Blaney noticed that the blond-beared one was looking at him suspiciously. He shrugged off the feeling of tension and walked into the station. Candles glowed on the three tables, and the pungent aroma of chili peppers floated through the hot dusty room. The Mexican woman, babbling effusively, showed Blaney up the stairs to his second-floor room. He slammed the door when she had left, and poured himself a drink from the tepid water in the cracked pitcher.

BLANEY slung one of the traveling bags onto the bed and unstrapped it. In the top was pasted a yellowing poster, announcing the appearance of Blaney Carr, Firearms Artiste Extraordinary, in a demonstration of his sensational skills, at the Belle Union Saloon in Abilene, Kansas.

Blaney looked with warm satisfaction at the five weapons nestled in the special pockets of the case. Four Colts, two on a side, flanked a small, delicately carved dueling pistol. Blaney picked this up in his hand, noting with pleasure that the oiled blue sheen of the barrel had not accumulated any dust.

He felt the weight against his palm. The Natchez Lady, he called it, after a black-haired woman in the rowdy house at Natchez-Under-the-Hill. That woman, he reflected, had almost gotten him entangled. Almost. He grinned wryly and put the pistol back in its place.

A door slammed in the room next to his. The sound was as loud as a pistol shot. Blaney could hear booted feet slamming loudly on the boards, hear the complaining of the bed as a heavy body lowered itself. Through the paper-thin wall drifted a voice that Blaney recognized as belonging to the heavier of the two men who had just ridden in.

"Chip," the voice rumbled, "just what in hell *are* we going to do? After I came all this way, I don't want to back out. I need that dough."

"You talk too damned much," the blond-bearded one said. "Whelan was supposed to meet us here to get the time straight. He's not here. We have to let him know about the time, and we can't ride into town ourselves."

"Maybe something happened," the other one rumbled.

"You lamebrain!" Chip snarled. "Of course something happened. Maybe Whelan had to stay late and go over books. Maybe anything. We have to figure something, that's all."

Blaney stood quietly not moving a muscle. The words of the men were only faintly muffled by the wall. Somehow Blaney could not help thinking that hearing them tightened some kind of a web of circumstance around him. Maybe he should move, or make a noise, so that the men would hear and would lower their voices. Then the scheme, whatever it was, could not affect him. But natural curiosity got the better of him.

Chip said, "We have to find some way to get a message to Whelan, Red. And fast."

"I could use a drink," Red complained.

Chip let out a string of angry, nervous curses. Blaney had the strange feeling that the hard-looking kid was frightened about something, and trying to bluff his way through. Blaney had seen it a hundred times in the eyes of buttons who swaggered in the streets, scared to death inside, but wanting to prove by the speed of their gun that they were somebody.

Chip decided that he could use a drink, too, and the two of them clumped noisily out of the room and down the hall. When they were gone down the stairs, Blaney shucked off his coat and washed some of the grit from his lean, somber face.

A few minutes later he went down the stairs to get something to eat. The fat Mexican woman brought out a steaming plate of Chili, and Blaney washed it down with black coffee. Chip and Red were over in one corner, nursing whisky glasses. Blaney glanced at them occasionally out of the corner of his

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eye, waiting, aware that they were watching him.

He wished that Caroline Hastings would come down. As he lit a thin black cigar and inhaled the strong smoke, he reflected that even Aunt Ella might be a welcome relief, breaking the silence. Somewhere beyond the walls of the room, thunder rattled like pebbles on a drum head.

A chair scraped loudly. Blaney flicked ash onto the floor, and waited. Chip came into his line of vision and stood before him, hands on his belt, his flop-brimmed hat pushed back on his blond head.

"Mind if I sit for a second, pilgrim?" Chip asked. Blaney waved him into a chair, watching with impassive eyes.

Chip motioned to Red. "Bring the bottle." As the big man lumbered over, Chip leaned his elbows on the table and grinned at Blaney, an empty soul-less grin. "Care for a drink?"

"All right," Blaney said.

Red sat down, trying to imitate his companion's smile. He slopped liquor into one of the shot glasses and shoved it across the table. The two men watched Blaney as he drained the glass and set it down again.

"You gents have something on your minds?" Blaney asked quietly.

Chip laughed abruptly, harshly, and dragged makings out of his shirt pocket. "You might say that. It appears you came in on the coach." Blaney gave no answer. Chip hesitated a moment and then went on, "You going on to Carbine Creek tomorrow?"

"I am."

Chip shoved one fist down into his trousers pocket. "It'd be worth five dollars to me, pilgrim, if you did me a little favor."

"Such as?"

"Oh, nothing, nothing much at all. Just look up a man for me when you get in, a feller named Whelan, and give him a message." Chip dragged some paper money out of his pocket and laid it on the table. "This feller is going on a little camping trip with us. We'd like to let him know what time he should ride out and meet us."

Blaney watched the slight flicker of Chip's eyes as he told the feeble lie. He thought he saw desperation in Chip's face, too. But he also was sure that Chip would be fast with a gun, if the time came to get his way by that means.

"What's the message?" Blaney asked.

"Will you or won't you deliver it? That's all I want to know, pilgrim," Chip said, faint irritation making his voice ragged.

The thunder rattled again, far away, and wind blowing through one of the windows made the candles sputter. The Mexican woman's voice sounded loudly from out back.

"Pilgrim," Blaney said with forced emphasis, "whether or not I deliver it depends on whether or not I think it's worth delivering. I don't need five dollars that bad. Now let's hear the message."

Red glanced helplessly at Chip, but the blond-bearded man just raised his hands, palms outward, in a gesture of resignation. "You win. Just tell him, 'three o'clock.' That's the time he's supposed to meet us for the camping trip," Chip added hastily.

"Where do I find this Whelan?"

Chip's eyes were serious now, gloomy and probing. "Carbine Creek Citizens Bank. He works there."

Blaney felt the shiver along his spine, stronger now. He pushed back his chair rapidly and stood up. The whole scheme was suddenly clear in his mind.

"Sorry, gents, I don't deliver messages like that," he said.

CHIP licked his lips and rose slowly. "What do you mean by that, pilgrim?" he said very softly. His hands clawed, the knuckles six inches from the gun butts on his hips.

"I mean I'm not delivering your message," Blaney said. He picked up his hat, dropped his cigar to the floor, and ground it out under his boot heel. "It's that simple. Now, if you'll excuse me."

He started forward, but Red's meaty fist pushed against his chest, blocking him. The Mexican woman opened the door and looked in. Then her eyes went wide and she ducked back through the door.

"You know what the name of my friend, here, is?" Red said heavily. "It's Chip—short for Poker Chip. You know how he got that name? Because he can drop a chip off the back of his hand, shoulder high, and

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draw his iron and shoot four times before the chip hits the ground. That's something, isn't it, mister?" Red's jaw stuck forward belligerently, menacingly.

Blaney tensed. These men were pushing him, and he disliked being pushed. A tight knot of anger formed in his stomach. The quickest way to put a stop to this, Blaney reasoned, would be to gun them both down—or try. *Four* times. Blaney himself could only fire three times, using the poker chip draw. Either the blond-bearded man was bluffing outrageously, or he was dangerous. Blaney didn't quite believe that he was bluffing.

"I haven't got a gun." Blaney said quietly, "but I can get one."

Red started to speak, but Poker Chip stepped forward and slapped his meaty hand down. Red stepped backward, frowning confusedly. "Okay, mister," Poker Chip said, anger fuming in his words as the man fought for control, "we'll forget about it. We'll just forget about the whole thing, for tonight. Maybe I'll look you up in Carbine Creek tomorrow, when you get a gun. All I wanted was a favor."

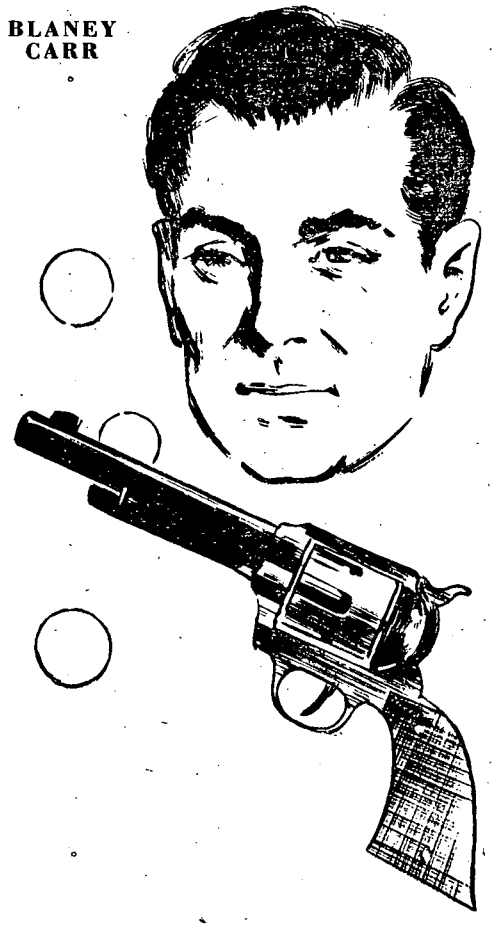
"It'll be a pleasure," Blaney said. "I'll see you at three o'clock."

Poker Chip grabbed Red's arm. "Come on." The two of them walked quickly toward the stairs. Blaney watched them until they were out of sight, then let out a long sigh. That was close. He had a perfect picture now. Somehow the man Whelan, who worked in the Carbine Creek Citizens Bank, had been delayed. Three o'clock. Blaney set his hat on his head and started for the outside door. Poker Chip and Red, with Whelan, on the inside to help, were going to smash the bank.

The air in the yard was hot and wet. The stars shone foggily in the black sky, and the horses stirred restlessly in the stable. Blaney thrust his hands deeply into his pockets as a white smear of lightning stained the horizon.

He did not hear the door open behind him, but suddenly he became aware of someone at his elbow. He turned, startled, and saw Caroline Hastings. The girl breathed deeply, and he thought he saw a smile curve her pretty face in the gloom.

Blaney swept off his hat. "Evening, Miss Hastings. I didn't see you come out."



Her laugh bubbled up through the darkness. "I came out for some air. The room is terribly hot, and Aunt Ella's complaining a lot." The laugh sounded again. "Aunt Ella's awfully nice, but she's frightened of any and every man. A week with her in San Antonio can get awfully long." She paused. "Are you going to Carbine Creek on business, Mr. Carr?"

Blaney hesitated only a second, then decided it would be better to get it over with. "No, not the usual kind of business. I'm appearing at the Crystal Saloon tomorrow."

"Oh!" It was a bright, startled exclamation. "Dad told me before I left last week that there was a shooting artist coming to town. Are you—"

"I am," Blaney said, "although I hesitate to admit it."

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"I think it's wonderful. I'll make Dad bring me."

Blaney was puzzled by her reply. It seemed honest, lacking pretense, and lacking, too, any show of shock or surprise. Somehow, though, the problem of Caroline Hastings's reaction to his not-too-honorable profession was dwarfed by the memory of Poker Chip and his companion.

"Miss Hastings," Blaney said quickly, "do you know a man in Carbine Creek by the name of Whelan?"

"Whelan? Of course, Jud Whelan. He works for my father."

"Your father!"

"Yes. Is anything the matter?"

"No, no, I . . ."

"Dad runs the Citizen Bank in Carbine Creek."

Before she could say more, the station door opened and there was Aunt Ella, stiff and stern-faced, peering into the darkness. She saw Caroline and beckoned. The girl turned, her skirts belling out around her.

"I've never liked Jud Whelan, Mr. Carr," she said quickly, "but it'll give us something to talk about on the ride in tomorrow. Good night."

"Good night," Blaney said.

He watched the door close, leaving the yard in darkness. He lit another cigar, his thoughts whirling furiously in his mind. Damn it, he thought vengefully, the thing got more complicated by the moment. It was a trap, snaring him in, binding him in cords of coming death and violence. Before, he thought bitterly, I could have taken a horse and ridden out.

A moment later he realized that was not true at all. His father's death had taught him to avoid entanglement, but it had never taught him cowardice. Not that he felt any great pleasure about the prospect of tomorrow in Carbine Creek. If it were true that Poker Chip could fire four times before the disk hit the ground, there was real danger.

Blaney couldn't have run away anyway, but he realized that, with Caroline Hastings having a very personal interest in the bank, he was pushed from a passive role to an active one. In one sense, he did not mind. Caroline's clean-scrubbed face flashed before his eyes again, young, smiling, and warm. A man might love . . .

HE STOPPED himself. Warm rain slammed against his cheeks, and a sudden flare of lightning turned the flat wasteland into a ghost landscape. He turned up his collar and ran for the doorway, as the rain came down harder. Once in his room, he put a chair under the knob. He took The Natchez Lady out of his bag, loaded it, and thrust it into his belt. Then, blowing out the lamp, he lay down. The room next door was silent.

He must have dozed off. Sudden hoofbeats above the hiss of the rain awakened him. He made it to the window in time to see Poker Chip and Red, limned in sudden pale lightning fire, splash out of the muddy yard and vanish in the distance. Perhaps they would abandon the plan, he thought hopefully. But he knew they wouldn't. Poker Chip would try; you could see the desperation in his eyes. Blaney knew that he would have to be at Carbine Creek at three o'clock tomorrow afternoon.

He lay down on the bed again, but he did not sleep the rest of the night. The Natchez Lady, hard as death, pressed against his belly as he lay listening to the rain.

Blaney was still awake when the Mexican woman knocked on his door at six the next morning, announcing that the stage for Carbine Creek would leave in a half hour, after the serving of breakfast downstairs. Blaney thanked her and lifted himself wearily off the bed.

He took The Natchez Lady out of his belt and replaced it in the case. Then, from his other bag, he took a brace of holsters, loaded two of the Colts, and thrust them in, strapping them across his hips so that the heavy butts faced forward.

He stood before the mirror and practiced a fast cross-hand draw. The Colts fairly leaped into his hands, but when he tried the poker chip draw with a coin, he still could only click the hammer three times before the coin rattled onto the floor. Frowning Blaney loaded the Colts and jammed them back into his holsters.

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Caroline Hastings and her aunt were already seated at a table downstairs, finishing their coffee. Caroline smiled and Blaney uttered a polite good morning, though he kept to a table by himself. Through the windows he could see that the passing storm had left the ground muddy, and the sky had a death-like gray pallor about it.

He drank two cups of coffee, thinking about the coming afternoon. And to think that none of this would have happened, he mused, if I hadn't agreed to play Carbine Creek. But he realized that he'd had no control over things happening the way they had. His only chance now was to control things from now on. Being a trick shot artist on a stage was one thing, stalking a pair of killers was quite another.

The driver banged open the door. "We're leaving, folks. Get aboard."

Blaney picked up his bags and walked forward. Aunt Ella made an acid comment about the terrible weather. Blaney caught Caroline's flashing look of amusement. He thought with pleasure, I don't think she gives a damn whether I'm a trick shot artist, or a blacksmith, or the King of Wall Street.

Blaney and the two women settled themselves in the coach, the driver blatted on his horn, and the horse jerked forward. The coach rolled out onto the road amid a great splattering of mud. The Mexican woman, the old man who hobbled, and the two urchins, waved as the coach pulled out. Then the Concord swung around a bend and down a dip, and they were out of sight.

"You ladies mind if I smoke?" Blaney inquired.

Aunt Ella's mouth opened like a steel trap but, before she could speak, Caroline smiled and said, "Not at all, Mr. Carr. Go right ahead."

Blaney lit up. He was doubtful as to whether or not he should broach the subject of the attack on the bank, and from what angle. Caroline Hastings solved the problem for him.

Leaning forward, she said, "Tell me, Mr. Carr, do you know Jud Whelan?"

"No," Blaney said after a moment. "I only know of him. Miss Hastings. . . ."

"Yes?"

"Two men rode into the station last night. Their names are Red and Poker Chip. From what I gathered, they're planning to rob your father's bank this afternoon."

The statement was greeted by a look of incredulity from the girl and a snort of outrage from Aunt Ella. "Are you quite serious, Mr. Carr?" the girl asked.

Blaney nodded. "They approached me, asked me to deliver a message to this Jud Whelan." And he outlined briefly the events of the preceding night.

Caroline's expression changed slowly to one of amazement, then of consternation. Aunt Ella emitted frightened gasps now and then, interspersed with, "I always said Jud Whelan was not a man to be trusted."

"So you see," Blaney concluded, "I'll have to go see your father as soon as we arrive in Carbine Creek."

Caroline nodded slowly. "Mr. Carr, I can't thank you enough for telling me this. You could have delivered the message for them." Her blue eyes glowed with warmth and appreciation.

Blaney glanced out the window of the coach at the ominous gray clouds still piled up on the horizon. The wheels bucked and plunged through the mud of the rutted road, and the miles dropped behind. Carbine Creek became more and more of a deadly reality in Blaney's mind with each passing moment.

At a little after nine the Concord rounded a bend and approached Carbine Creek's main street. The driver whipped up the horses and tooted loudly on his horn. Blaney stretched his legs, somehow glad that the wearisome journey was over. The board fronts of the buildings began to flash by, and Blaney saw the cowmen and loungers on the sidewalks waving their hats and whooping it up as the stage creaked to a halt before the Wells-Fargo offices.

The arrival of the stage in these cow towns, Blaney reflected, was always the same, a noisy roistering occasion for public celebration. If they knew, Blaney told himself, that a couple of hard cases were going to make a try for their bank in a few hours, they maybe wouldn't be so ready to shout.

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CAROLINE waved to a portly man in a brown suit and cowman's hat, who pushed his way through the crowd. "That's Dad," she exclaimed to Blaney, who caught at her arm as she alighted.

"Please, Miss Hastings," he said softly, "I'd appreciate it if you said nothing about this until I can get a chance to talk to your father alone. I think it'll be safer that way."

"All right," Caroline said. "Can you come to the bank in, say, half an hour?"

Blaney nodded. "I'll be there."

He turned quickly and pushed through the crowd as the heavy man put his arms around his daughter, his ruddy face beaming happily. Smiling faintly, Blaney strode on up the board sidewalk toward the Crystal Saloon and Hotel. He checked in, told the proprietor that he was on hand for the evening's performance, had a beer in the nearly empty saloon, and then started out for the bank.

As he pushed through the saloon batwings, he noticed the two yellow posters with brilliant red lettering which announced his appearance, described with glowing adjectives. Somehow Blaney didn't feel quite the same enthusiasm.

The main street looked like every other Texas cowtown he had seen—the stores and the saloons, the street full of muddy sink holes, ladies in chaste-looking dresses and bonnets marching here and there on errands, roughly dressed cattlemen riding through, old men sitting on barrels in front of the general store.

Several rattling buckboards, a horde of Mexican children playing in the mud, and one creaking Murphy wagon belonging to a drummer, completed the commonplace picture. Three o'clock, Blaney thought suddenly. Then comes the fury, the violence, the death.

The gold letters on the wide windows announced, *Carbine Creek Citizens Bank*. Blaney pushed through the door, and Caroline rose quickly from a bench to meet him. She grasped his hand impulsively, indicating a sallow man of about fifty, behind one of the cages. His head was bowed, so that Blaney could only see his small black eyes.

"That's Jud Whelan," Caroline whispered. "Dad's waiting in his office."

She took his arm and led him toward the rear of the bank. Several heads, including that of Jud Whelan, turned to follow them. At any other time Blaney would have been proud to have a girl like Caroline Hastings on his arm. Now he was preoccupied by the thought wrapped up in the words, "three o'clock."

His thoughts were interrupted as Caroline rushed through a polished wooden door next to the vault. Her father, identified by the sign on his desk as Marcus Hastings, rose and extended his hand.

"Mr. Carr. Pleased to meet you, sir. Caroline told me you had some important business to discuss with us, though he did not say exactly what it was. Sit down."

Blaney eased himself into a chair and began his story. Midway through, Marcus Hastings rose to his feet and began pacing around. When Blaney had finished, he slapped his hands together angrily.

"Mr. Carr, I'm grateful to you for telling me this." He faced Blaney. "This town's a fairly peaceable one. We haven't had anything like this as long as I've been living here, and that's fifteen years."

"I imagine your vault's well stocked," Blaney said wryly.

"Damned right it is. There's over thirty thousand dollars right this minute."

"And," Blaney ran on, "since these two men obviously have some connection with Jud Whelan, they probably thought it would be an easy bank to crack."

"Whelan!" Hastings exclaimed, glancing vengefully at the door. "I should have gotten rid of him long ago, the scum." Hastings looked intently at Blaney. "Mr. Carr, in the light of the fact that Whelan did not show up last night, do you believe the two of them will still try to carry off their plan?"

"I think so," Blaney replied. "As far as I know, they had no idea that I overheard them talking in their room. They probably believe I fell for the story about the hunting trip, or at least wasn't smart enough to figure out what they were planning." Blaney frowned. "They pushed me a little too hard last night, Mr. Hastings. I don't like to be pushed."

"Then all we have to do," Caroline said swiftly, "is get the marshal and some men."

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Hastings jerked open a drawer in the desk, lifted out a holstered sixgun, and strapped it on. "Three o'clock's closing time," he explained to Blaney. "Whelan has the job of locking up. He was probably planning to hold the door open long enough for them to slip in." Hastings jerked the belt tight. "Right now I'll attend personally to Jud Whelan."

"Dad," Caroline said intently, stepping forward, "don't you think the marshal ought to handle this?"

Hastings strode toward the door. He turned abruptly, his thick eyebrows knotted together, an expression of outrage on his face. "Caroline, I'll let the marshal lock Jud Whelan up, but any man that's planning to help rob my bank is going to know how I feel about it. Coming, Carr?"

Blaney fanned back the wings of his coat, rubbed his hands on his trousers, and nodded. Hastings jerked the door open with startled expressions. Jud Whelan, in the cage second from the front, was still bending over something. As they approached, Blaney could see his long sallow fingers riffling through a stack of bills.

Hastings came to a stop before the cage, Blaney right behind him. Blaney noted that fortunately the only customer had just walked out the door into the street. Only the bank help watched tensely. Wheland did not notice the two men. For a moment the only sound in the long room was the whispering riffle of the bills sliding under his fingers.

HASTINGS coughed and cleared his throat. "Whelan!"

The man glanced up, his face pale and pasty. His small black eyes passed over Blaney and rested on Marcus Hastings with nothing besides curiosity. He could not see the bank president's hand hovering over his sixgun below the cage counter.

"Yes, Mr. Hastings?" Whelan asked, his voice a hoarse wheeze.

"Three o'clock," Hastings said, his face purpling. His hand came up, holding the heavy gun, and Blaney heard the ugly snick of the cocking hammer. "Three o'clock Whelan," Hastings repeated vengefully. "You won't be here to welcome your friends."

"How in—"

Whelan's tongue ran over his lips, and the pad of bills dropped to the counter. Blaney noticed that Whelan's hands were pulling slowly to the edge of the counter. Blaney tensed.

"I think Mr. Whelan ought to keep his hands up where we can see them," he said softly.

Whelan tried to laugh. He lifted his hands toward his shoulders in a gesture of resignation. "Of course, if you say so. Mr. Hastings, this is ridiculous."

Suddenly, with the speed of twin serpents lashing out, Whelan flung the wad of bills into Hasting's face, while his other hand plunged below the counter and appeared with a pepper-pot derringer. Somewhere at the rear of the bank Blaney heard Caroline's thin frightened shriek.

Blaney's hands dropped, even as he told himself that he was giving a performance, the most important performance he had ever given, perhaps. The Colts rose with miraculous speed. Hastings had stumbled to the side in the instant when the flurry of paper money struck him.

It was Blaney facing Whelan and Blaney knew the other already had an advantage of seconds. The derringer fired and Blaney twisted wildly to the right, catching the charge in his left arm. With swift precision he swung the right-hand Colt across the crook of his left elbow, and fired once.

Whelan bounded backward, his hand twisting askew on his shoulders as he tried to shake his head and get rid of the realization of death. Then he stiffened, relaxed, and slid down the wall.

Hastings gathered his composure and approached Blaney. He touched the arm gingerly. "Hurt much?" he asked.

Blaney shook his head. He took off his coat, with Caroline's help, and rolled up his shirt sleeve. The slug had gone all the way through the flesh of his lower arm. Blaney tried to bend his arm and the elbow, and found that there was now a little stiffening. He grinned sourly.

"Well, it looks like there won't be much of a performance tonight."

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"You've still got the right arm," Hastings said. "I'd be lost if I couldn't use my right arm."

Blaney thought suddenly of three o'clock, and frowned. "I do almost everything with my right hand, Mr. Hastings, even shooting. But I shoot a lot better with my left." He grimaced at the blood-stained flesh.

Hastings seemed to straighten up and take command of the situation. He called to two of the men to collect Jud Whelan's corpse. "We'll take him down and let the marshal keep him until Doc Flagg can come for him. Mr. Carr, I'd appreciate it if you'd stick around until I get back. I'm going to have the marshal round up his deputies, and I guarantee we'll have a good reception for those two if they show up at three o'clock."

Blaney nodded wearily. The wound, which he had bound up with his handkerchief, did not bleed a great deal, but it put a dull numbing ache through his whole left arm. Caroline Hastings led him to one of the benches along the wall. He lowered himself to a seat, fished a cigar out of his vest, and held it in the wooden fingers of his left hand.

Caroline took out his matches and lit one, holding it up to the cigar. Marcus Hastings and the two men carrying Whelan's corpse vanished out the door. Blaney watched them turn right along the sidewalk, past the big plate glass window beneath which he was sitting. Blaney inhaled and then blew out a plume of smoke, as Caroline dropped the match to the floor.

"Damn it," Blaney said exasperatedly, "I'm no cripple, Miss Hastings."

"Caroline is my name," she said softly. Her hand touched his right arm. "You've done so much already, please—"

"Sorry if I'm cross," he said. "But a trick shot artist isn't much good without his bag of tricks, and those don't come easy if you've got a shot-up wing."

"The marshal and his men will handle those two this time."

Blaney sat up straight, fierce alarm bells jangling in his brain. Two men had ridden up before the bank and dismounted. They were clumping across the board sidewalk before Blaney realized what was going on. His mind yelled at him and he realized they must have been in town all the time, and seen Whelan carted out, followed by three members of the bank staff. So there'd had to be a change of plan.

Poker Chip flipped the stump of his cigar away and pushed through the door. Two guns appeared in his fists. Red followed him. Chip's face was drawn into tense, angry lines. Blaney's hand clawed for his left-hand gun. He noted that there were only three other men in the bank, all of them apparently unarmed. Red spotted Blaney and, with an angry curse, brought his gun up. Poker Chip stopped him, the muzzle of his Colt swinging around on Blaney's belly. Caroline breathed harshly, loudly.

"Hold it, Red," Poker Chip said. "It's our friend. You cover him."

Without another word Poker Chip walked back toward the cages. One of the tellers made a dive for the counter and Poker Chip's gun boomed loudly, making a hollow racketing echo in the high-ceilinged room. The man coughed and his fingers clawed feebly at the counter's edge.

"Now," Poker Chip said to the other two men, who were unarmed out in the open and away from the counters, "get in that vault and clean it out. And make it fast."

The two men moved quickly. They could see, as Blaney did, the hard eagerness in the blond-bearded man's eyes. Poker Chip was determined and, worse than that, he was secretly quivering with fear. Blaney figured that made him all the more dangerous.

RED glowered at him. "Looks like you got yerself shot, friend," he said to Blaney. "Me'n Poker Chip figured you might have queered the deal when they dragged Whelan out. You were going to wait for three o'clock to come, weren't you?" He laughed harshly. Blaney's right hand inched along his belt. Red's gun moved slightly. "Just stop right there with that hand, friend. You make a nice fat target."

Blaney felt the tight edge of fear gripping him more fiercely than ever. He glanced at Caroline. Her lower lip stuck determinedly forward, but he could see her trembling.

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One of the men came out of the vault with a satchel. "I got it all," he said.

Blaney cast an anxious glance at the street. Damn it, he cursed, damn it, why doesn't somebody come in? And then he noticed for the first time that a thin rain was drizzling down, and no one moved on the sidewalks.

Then he saw the woman through the plate glass window, approaching the bank with a prim walk. Red saw her too and called loudly, "Chip! There's a woman coming."

Chip made a hasty inspection of the satchel, seemed to approve, and started back toward Blaney. The woman came in the door, and Red swung on her. He grabbed her arm, and his fist cut her cheek viciously in a slap to stifle her scream. Blaney make a wild stab for his Colt and got it free. But Poker Chip was less than a step away now.

Blaney's gun bucked in his fist and Poker Chip howled, the Colt spinning out of his bloodied fist. Poker Chip swung the satchel wildly and it struck Blaney's wounded arm. Fresh pain jolted along his nerves, and his eyes hazed behind a reddish mist. Blaney felt his knees going out from under him, tried to fight the sick feeling, and knew that he couldn't stop it.

Through pain-dimmed eyes he heard Poker Chip shout to Red, "Get the horses around to the back." Red disappeared through the door, and then Blaney heard Caroline's thin scream. "Hey, pilgrim," Poker Chip said loudly. Blaney rolled his head to the side, seeing the blond-beared man only dimly. He fought to re-gather his strength. "We're taking—damn you!"

There was an angry slap of flesh on flesh, and Caroline's voice trailed off in a muted sob. "We're taking this little lady, pilgrim. You tell the man that runs the bank that the bartender across the way said Hastings likes his daughter a lot. You tell him we'll let him know how he can buy her back."

Blaney reached out weakly with his right hand for Poker Chip's leg. "Damn you," Poker Chip swore, and a heavy boot crashed down agonizingly on Blaney's hand.

From somewhere in the back of the room Blaney heard Red calling to Poker Chip, and then Caroline's voice retreated down a long corridor of sound, faintly sobbing. A door slammed, Blaney heard rain tapping on the plate glass window, heard horses' hoofs rattle. Then the pain inside him swelled, and he blacked out.

When Blaney awoke a few minutes later, Marcus Hastings was bending over him, his heavy face drawn in lines of anguish. He shook Blaney's shoulders gently, and Blaney sat up, moving his head dazedly from side to side.

"Did they—" Blaney fairly shouted, when thoughts came flooding back.

Marcus Hastings nodded slowly. "They took Caroline. Mr. Carr, they've got my daughter, and the marshal isn't even in town."

"What!" Blaney got shakily to his feet. The effort brought a new throbbing in his head. "Where is he?"

"Over in Ross Bend. They had a fight there last night between a couple of drunks." Marcus Hastings's smile, entirely without humor, showed the bitter irony in his mind.

"How much money did they get?" Blaney asked.

"Nearly nineteen thousand in cash," Hastings said glumly. "Cartwright managed to keep some of the money hidden."

Blaney said weakly, "Let me go after them. Let me try. When will the marshal be back?"

"Middle of the afternoon," Hastings replied.

"All right. Until then, I'll try to find her. I don't guarantee anything."

"Man, you're wounded!" Hastings exclaimed.

"All right!" Blaney shouted. "I'm wounded, but she may be dead if they get the urge to pull out and not worry about waiting for ransom money out of you." Hastings started to protest, but then kept silent. "Now, where would they go? It would have to be some place where they could get shelter. They wouldn't want to keep your daughter out in the open for very long, where somebody might see her."

"Ross Bend and the stage station are the two nearest places," Hastings said.

Blaney thought about it. Then he said, "If the same bartender who told them about your daughter also told them where the marshal's gone, they wouldn't likely to go to Ross Bend. Besides, they know the stage station. Get me

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a horse. I'll be back here in fifteen minutes. Where's the doctor's office?"

Hastings gave him directions. Doc Flagg bandaged Blaney's arm as best he could, and gave him a couple of pain-killer pills. They dulled the ache some, but Blaney's left arm was still useless. And the bones of his right hand ached where Poker Chip had stomped them. Returning to the hotel, Blaney broke out the other two Colts, loaded them, and shoved them into his holsters. He hesitated. Then he hefted the Natchez Lady and thrust it into his belt, after discarding his vest. He looked at his face in the chipped mirror.

WHY, he thought, why are you getting mixed up in all this, death and robbery and human passions? And then he thought he had the answer. He had lived for a long time as a self-sufficient man, but people were not built to be that way. They needed ties and a sense of belonging.

In this town Blaney had had a chance to prove himself, to make himself valuable as something more than a traveling jokester with a bag of clever tricks, to be laughed at and forgotten. He knew he was afraid, but somehow there was a good feeling mingled with the fear and the desperate hope that Caroline Hastings would not die. Blaney picked up his hat. If he lived, he would be a better man.

He went downstairs to the Crystal Saloon and drank one quick shot of whisky. Then he tramped back through the rain to the bank. Hastings wished him luck. Shivering against the cold drizzle, Blaney rode around to the rear of the bank. Rain had wiped out any trail that might have been left. Blaney kicked his mount and rode back to the main street and out of town, toward the way station.

The road became a soggy bed of mud, and Blaney rode toward higher ground, where he could parallel the rutted stage tracks and still make fairly good time. The rain came down harder now, a driving gray sheet behind which the spindly trees loomed like ghostly hands.

Blaney was aware of the throbbing ache in his left arm. His right hand still tingled from the force of Poker Chip's blow, although he felt he could use the hand to shoot.

Blaney kicked the horse harder, slipping and sliding down the small rises, until at last he saw a rambling gray shape sprawled out in the mist ahead of him. He pulled the horse to a halt, got down, and jerked his hat low over his eyes.

He began to go forward, creeping in close to the wall of the stable and sliding forward toward the main yard. Crouching at the corner of the wall, he listened, and heard shuffling footsteps just inside the stable door, accompanied by the restless stamp of hoofs. He fanned back his coat, pulled his left-hand Colt with his right hand, took a deep breath, and leaped around the corner.

He saw an old man, who whirled, almost dropping the feebly glowing lantern he held. "You like to scared a body to death!" he exclaimed.

Blaney hoisted the Colt commandingly. He noticed two horses in the stalls, showing signs of recent use. "The two men that were here last night," Blaney said softly. "Are those their horses?"

"Yep," the old man replied, licking his lips and watching Blaney carefully. "They just rode in a short while ago. You a friend of theirs?"

"That's right," Blaney said evenly, "I'm a friend. Where'd they go?"

"Mama Noches gave them their rooms back, I guess." The old man sniggered. "Sure looked fishy, though. I mean—" The old man cast a suddenly worried glance at Blaney.

"Go ahead. Say it." The old man still hesitated. "Say it!" Blaney commanded.

"Well, they dragged that girl in with them and took her upstairs. It just looks fishy, that's all. I didn't mean any harm. Mister," he burst out suddenly, "I don't want any trouble. I'm just an old man who talks a mite too much. I'll keep it all quiet, I swear."

Blaney waved him silent with the barrel of his gun. "Which way inside? There?" He indicated the door in the opposite wall of the stable.

"Right there, yes siree," the old man cackled. "That takes you in near the stairs. Here, let me get it open for you, friend."

He started forward in a hobble, saw Blaney striding toward the door, and shrank back. Blaney listened for a moment, heard nothing

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but the old man's breathing, the noise of the horses in the rain. He eased the door open and stepped into the gloomy hall.

To his left the stairs ran upward. Straight ahead, the Mexican woman Mama Noches sat telling her beads by the glow of a bottled candle, murmuring sadly to herself and shaking her head from time to time. Blaney took a step forward. A board in the floor squealed softly.

The Mexican woman looked up, her mouth opening to let out a startled scream. Blaney put a hasty finger to his lips, and her mouth remained open but soundless. Quickly he braced his shoulder against the wall, holstered his Colt, and pulled off his boots, setting them carefully on the floor. Then he drew out The Natchez Lady, felt its weight in his hand, checked the loads. At close range it could blow a man's head off.

Blaney padded quietly over to the Mexican woman. "The men and the girl," he whispered. "Upstairs?"

She nodded, frightened. "Senor, I wish no trouble here. There is bad trouble with those two *hombres* and the girl. I did not wish to give them rooms, but the one with the beard, he hit me and said he will kill me if I do not."

"Which rooms?" Blaney asked softly.

"The two men took the room they had last night. The poor *senorita,* she is tied in the room I gave to you. *Senor, por favor,* no trouble." Her fingers played restlessly over the beads.

"Gracias," Blaney said tightly. "You sit here and keep still, and maybe I'll get rid of those two for you."

He took another deep breath and started up the stairs, testing each one carefully for noise before he lowered his full weight upon it.

He paused at the top of the stairs.

The door to his room stood open; the one beyond belonging to Poker Chip and Red was closed. Closing his fingers tightly on the butt of The Natchez Lady and curling his finger gently around the trigger, he crept down the hall and darted swiftly but noiselessly into the door of his room.

One quick look around told him all he needed to know.

CAROLINE HASTINGS lay on the rude bed, her arms and legs tied and her mouth gagged with dirty cloths. Mud spatters stained her dress, and there was blood on one cheek. She was unconscious. Blaney had half-turned back toward the door when the girl rolled over. She groaned, the tortured frown born of frightening dreams on her face. The bed creaked. Blaney could hear his heart send its thundering pulses up through his throat.

From the next room came Poker Chip's voice. "Red, go see if she's still out. I heard her moaning in there."

"She's all right, Red said.

"Go see!" Poker Chip ordered.

Red grumbled something else, and Blaney felt the sweat beading his forehead. If he moved one inch now, Red would have his gun out and ready. Blaney needed the advantage of surprise. He was facing the mirror, which in turn reflected the doorway. Blaney fought the pain as he lifted his wounded arm and poked the barrel of The Natchez Lady under his elbow.

He sighted in the mirror, remembering how he did the trick in saloons under the glow of guttering lamps. Now it was more than a trick, The rain hissed loudly on the board roof. Red stepped into the hall, and an instant later his form appeared in the mirror, framed by the oblong of the doorway.

Red let out a startled curse, his hand dropped for his gun. Blaney squeezed the trigger of The Natchez Lady, and there was a sharp hollow explosion. It blew Red across the hall, where he twisted up on the floor, screaming and holding his stomach.

Blaney bolted for the hall, hearing Poker Chip's startled curse from the other room. He kicked the door open. Poker Chip was frozen on one knee on the bed in an attitude of fright. His hand had almost reached the butt of the gun in the holster hanging on the bed post.

Blaney's sharp, "Hold it," stopped him.

Poker Chip settled back on his haunches, staring at Blaney with startled fear in his eyes. Blaney grinned hollowly. "One move, pilgrim," he said, "and you'll get a bullet in you."

"Sure," Poker Chip said, sneering. "Go

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ahead. You're the boss with the gun in your hand."

Blaney cursed quietly. "Shut up and put your feet on the floor. We're going back to Carbine Creek."

Poker Chip slid off the bed and stood up, hands on his belt. He grinned broadly now, arrogantly, even though there was just the faintest sign of a quaver in his voice. "Scared to take your chances, are you? A fancy shooter, and he's scared."

Rage boiled up in Blaney, rage mingled with the nagging fear that perhaps the man was right, perhaps he was scared when you came right down to it. Red had obviously been the poorer shot of the pair. Now, Blaney felt doubts of his own skill. Stop thinking that, he told himself. You've got to take this man in to the law. But the voice couldn't stand up against the suspicions that Poker Chip had planted in his mind.

Poker Chip took an eager step forward. "I'll make a deal with you."

"No deals," Blaney said sharply.

"Scared?"

"Damn you!" Blaney shouted.

Poker Chip laughed. "Look at him. Scared silly, he is, scared to stand up to me. Listen, mister." Poker Chip said savagely, "why do you think I got my name? I can shoot four times before the chip falls. Scared to find out? Sure you are. Sure, sure, sure!" Poker Chip threw his head back and laughed loudly.

Blaney's nerves were strung tight within him. "Wait a minute," he said. Poker Chip stopped laughing. "What's your proposition?"

"Sure you're not yellow?" Poker Chip said.

"Talk when I ask a question, or I'll kill you where you stand!" Blaney snarled.

"Okay, okay, sure." Poker Chip put his hands up placatingly. "Here's the deal, friend. You and I go outside. We each take a rock or a coin or something and we count to three, and we both draw, poker chip style. The one that shoots fastest walks away alive. It's simple." Poker Chip watched Blaney carefully.

Blaney knew that the man was probably bluffing, tricking him into a situation where he would get himself killed. But somehow he could not help feeling that he couldn't go on if he let the nagging fear lick him. He was a fool to take the chance, but he couldn't help himself.

"All right," Blaney said. "Let's go downstairs."

Poker Chip uttered a short laugh and reached for the holster hanging on the bed post. Blaney motioned him back. "We'll use my guns." Poker Chip shrugged.

Blaney reached out, snagged the hanging gun, and chucked it into the corner. He handed the holster to Poker Chip, who belted it around his lean hip. He preceded Blaney out the door and down the hall to the stairs.

The Mexican woman, Mama Noches, saw them come down the stairs, and a gasp of fear escaped her lips. She crossed herself rapidly and rushed toward Blaney, gasping pleas for no trouble in her establishment. Blaney pushed her gently out of the way, as Poker Chip opened the door.

The two men stepped out into the rain. Wordlessly Blaney waited until Poker Chip had picked his spot, then paced off ten yards and turned. The land around them was obscured by the drenching rain. The old man watched them from the door of the stable

Blaney thrust The Natchez Lady into his belt, drew both his Colts, and tossed one of them to Poker Chip. "In your holster," he called. Poker Chip, legs slightly spread, shoulders hunched, and head leaning forward, pushed the Colt lightly into place and waited. Blaney held his gun in his wooden left hand as he fished in his trousers pocket.

He came up with two half-dollar pieces, and tossed one to Poker Chip, who caught it deftly. Blaney shifted his Colt to his right hand, then replaced it in his left holster. He would lose precious seconds of advantage using the cross-hand draw, but there was nothing he could do about it. The rain kicked up splatters in the pools of the yard, and behind one of the windows the Mexican woman's face was a shapeless white blur.

BLANEY lifted his left arm, fighting the pain, finally getting it extended straight forward from his shoulder. He placed the half-dollar piece on the back of his hand, as Poker Chip did the same. Blaney couldn't

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quite make out the man's features through the pall of rain, but he thought he saw a sudden grin split the dirty blond beard.

"I'll count," Blaney called. "Drop the coin on three."

"Good luck, tinhorn," Poker Chip called back harshly.

Blaney took a deep breath. It wasn't much of a place to die, this forsaken way station in Texas, with the rain coming down cold and only an old woman and a senile oldster watching you go to your grave.

"One," Blaney counted.

He felt a sudden surge of an intangible something along his nerves, new quickness, new perception, the responses of his body to a danger situation. The rain blew cold on his cheeks, and Poker Chip looked like a predatory vulture through the gray haze.

"Two."

There was a laugh, and Blaney called himself a fool. Then he stopped thinking and let the nerves of his body take over. Poker Chip made no pretense of dropping the coin. It fell to the ground, and his arm lowered and his other hand dragged the Colt free. A red smear lit the rain.

Blaney felt something strike his right hip, and in that instant he dropped the coin and his right hand whipped across his body and down. He snatched the Colt and brought it up, blazing, once, twice, three times, four.

Even before he looked at Poker Chip, Blaney's eyes flashed downward and saw the half-dollar piece strike the muddy ground. Then he saw Poker Chip sprawled face down in the mud, his head twisted strangely askew and the rain falling in his open startled mouth. Blaney smiled weakly and let the Colt fall from his numbed fingers. The door opened and the Mexican woman rushed forward. Blaney kept telling her he couldn't stand up, and she kept trying to hold him. The rain got darker, blacker, and then he was lying in the mud. His eyes closed and his mind darkened.

Slowly his mind swam back to consciousness. The sheets that covered his body crinkled stiffly as he tried to move. There was a dull pain in his hip, and one in his arm. Faces blurred above him—Marcus Hastings and his daughter, the girl pale cheeked but smiling. Her hand touched his bare shoulder, leaving a warm, pleasant sensation. "Are you all right?" she asked haltingly.

Doc Flagg bustled into view. "Of course he's all right, Caroline. The man's no weakling. He got two slugs in him in the space of a day, which is a might good record, but nothing vital's injured. You women fuss too much." Still babbling good-naturedly, Doc Flagg collected his things in his bag and left the room.

Blaney's mind recalled only dimly the things that Marcus Hastings said to him. There was talk of how Mama Noches, out at the station, had sent the old man skedaddling into town on a mule to fetch the doctor for Blaney; how they had retrieved the satchel of money and brought Blaney here, to the Hastings house.

All through the talk, Blaney kept seeing Caroline's face, showing signs of the strain born in the hours when she had been with Poker Chip and Red, but with the vivacity and youth still bubbling in it. Even the watery sun shining in through the bedroom window and dappling the sheets made Blaney feel good.

Caroline drew up a chair and sat down, smiling at him. She took hold of his hand. "Blaney," she said softly.

He grinned at her. "I guess they had to cancel my performance, after all."

"That doesn't matter. What does matter is what you did for me."

Blaney frowned. "Look, Caroline. I wouldn't want you to think it was your duty to be nice to me."

She smiled, and bent over and kissed him on the mouth. When she drew back her eyes sparkled. "Dad would think me forward for doing such a thing, but I didn't do it because I was grateful—not by a long shot."

Blaney laughed. He felt sleepiness overtaking him again, and he fought it, but within minutes her face drifted into the darkness again. Before his mind relaxed completely, he saw himself giving up the traveling, giving up the road and the lamp glow of the saloon stages. Maybe a man needed to be entangled. Yes, Blaney thought, no man could remain

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alone forever. Sleep claimed him then.

In a few days he was up and about the house, walking shakily at first, but then back to normal health. He had a talk with the marshal one night. It seemed that one of his deputies had been shot in Ross Bend on the day that Poker Chip and Red had made their try for the bank. Blaney dickered with the sheriff, arrived at a satisfactory salary, and when he walked out of the office he had a new job.

But townspeople have memories, and Carbine Creek would not let him forget. Blaney Carr, deputy marshal, gave a show one evening in the Crystal Saloon before a capacity audience. He appeared on the stage in a new black suit, bowed, and opened his gun case.

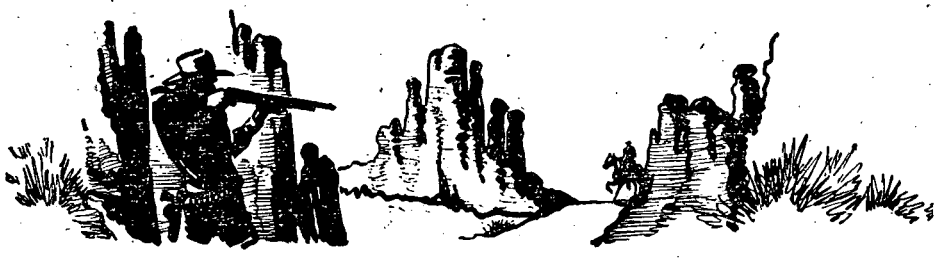
He did several tricks, and then Marcus Hastings came up on the stage to narrate briefly "The Spectacular Story of How Mr. Blaney Carr Personally Saved The Bank of Carbine Creek and Rescued The Fair Maiden." It was a tale embroidered with all the imagination that comes with recollection of deeds that seem not at all heroic or spectacular when they are performed.

Blaney enjoyed it, though, and in the rear of the house he could see Caroline, smiling at him warmly. Yes, he thought, it's good to have people around you. It's good to belong.

He demonstrated the trick with the mirror that had killed Red, and then, for the climax of the program, he placed a new silver dollar on the back of his hand, and tipped the hand. As the coin fell, winking in the glow of the lamps, Blaney Carr drew his Colt with his left hand and blasted four shots into a wooden target.

The crowd rose to its feet in roaring approval. Blaney stood with the glare of the lamps in his eyes and the acrid smoke of the Colt in his nostrils. Beyond the mob of cheering humanity, he saw Caroline.

Yes, he thought, with a feeling of warmth, this was the last performance on the stage for Mr. Blaney Carr.



Coming up in the next issue

The Angry Men

They said Sheriff Gordon was a hard man . . . but he was just tired of seeing the guilty escape and the good men suffer

A Magazine-Length Novel

By WILL COTTON

Satan Wears A Stetson

Clee couldn't tell whether Kathy was just being friendly . . . or if she were using a woman's weapons to get her way

An Exciting Novelette

By RAY GAULDEN

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The Alaskan Joker

a true story by Fred Harvey

THE doors of the saloon pushed open and the little man came flying out. "Dawson Tom, if I ever catch you in my bar again I'll break your neck," the owner said.

Dawson Tom picked himself up and raised himself to his full five feet. "If I ever do, you can. You've got the worst drinking whisky in Alaska," he said. Then he scampered off.

It was winter and Dyea, Alaska, was no place to be without funds during the gold rush. Dawson Tom could go to work, but he'd rather gamble and drink; and he needed a drink real bad right now. Every bar he went to turned him down.

In desperation for a slug of firewater, he hit upon an idea that was to make his name a byword in the frozen north.

He came into a saloon one day, pulled a stick of dynamite from his pocket, and lit the fuse.

"Okay, folks," he said. "Get moving." The saloon was cleared in a minute.

Half an hour later, when no explosion was heard, the people returned. Dawson Tom was gone, and so were several bottles of the saloon's finest liquor. On the bar was the stick of "dynamite"—a painted piece of wood. The prospectors and miners laughed at the joke.

The same set-up happened in many bars during Dawson Tom's stay in Alaska. He would light the fuse on a stick of dynamite and tell the folks to get. When they came back, they found the painted stick.

One day he tried a different stunt. He came into a bar with a small barrel. "This is black powder," he said. "Get moving." When the people came back, they discovered a barrel of wood shavings sitting in the middle of the barroom.

For a while Dawson Tom was welcome as a jokester, and drinks were furnished him. But this could not last. Finally he located a gold claim at Forty Mile, and went to work. But soon after he started to gamble again, pawned his claim many times, and supposedly high-tailed it out of town, $90,000 to the good.

But money slipped through his fingers like water. On the River Koyukuk he boarded a ship, got the captain into a card game, and won the ship and all his money. The captain stayed on as navigator as far as Betel. Before they arrived, the captain told Dawson Tom they needed fuel.

They loaded the ship, but before starting the captain demanded payment for navigating. The price was more than the ship's cargo was worth, and Dawson Tom refused payment. An argument followed, and Tom was thrown overboard. He swam ashore.

Dawson Tom's end was as luckless as the rest of his career. One day, homeless and broke, he came to the cabin of two prospectors. He stole their provisions and skipped. When the prospectors returned, they were boiling mad. With guides they tracked Tom down, and ended his adventures with a neck-tie party in which he was the "guest of honor."

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"I thought you would be too big to hate," Carol said softly.

Journey of No Return

By T. V. Olsen

FRANK KENTON HAD a job to do when he got out of jail . . . and he had no time for the girl who wanted to reawaken an old love

FRANK KENTON came back to Trail because he had nowhere else to go. And the first day back, he knew it was a mistake. People never forget.

He came in on the train in late afternoon and registered at the hotel, then went for a walk. In this new-found freedom, he could not get enough of the air and sunlight, of stretching his legs long and briskly, just walking. The town talked behind their hands as he went up and down the streets. He had paid his score to the law; that should have ended it.

He had not been especially bitter on his release, nor up to the time he had begun this walk. Yet less than an hour later, when he returned to his hotel, there was room in his mind for only one thought: to kill a man.

When Frank Kenton left the hotel the next morning, he wore a large-caliber gun under the shoulder of his shabby black suit coat. After a meal at the cafe, served by the waitress in stony silence, he stood on the sidewalk outside and lighted his after-breakfast cigar.

He was a tall, nearly gaunt man in the

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mid-thirties, whose lined sensitive face was withdrawn and unfriendly. Standing looking at the town he'd once called home, he was aware of the bitter knowledge that a man could pay forever for a moment's unforeseen violence.

He saw the man and girl leave a house down the street and proceed along the walk toward him, laughing at some joke. The girl's bright laughter reached Kenton, rippling a half-forgotten chord of memory in him. He watched her closely as they neared him. She was tall and slim in a plain bombazine dress, and the early sunlight struck white fire from her pale hair.

It's Carol, he thought with a stir of emotion. Carol Langerfels had grown into womanhood. Sam Langerfels, her father, was walking at her side. She must not be married yet, Kenton thought in surprise, yet she would be about twenty-five now.

He saw her start of recognition as she noticed him. A warm gladness began in her face. Then Sam Langerfels, also seeing Kenton, spoke sharply to her. She turned with slow obedience, but with trouble in her face, and started back toward the house.

Langerfels walked on toward Kenton, his black frock coat whipped by his long strides. Kenton dropped his suddenly tasteless cigar to the walk and ground a heel on it, thinking resignedly, here it comes.

Kenton had a fleeting impulse to turn his back on the man, but to what end? Inevitably, he'd have to talk to Langerfels, and it might as well be now as later. Langerfels stopped before him. The man had not changed much in six years, Kenton decided, except that he was a little leaner, perhaps, a little grayer. Langerfels extended a hand.

"How long has it been, Frank?"

The hell with you, Kenton thought, then caught Langerfels's gaze, which was wholly neutral, without friendliness but without reserve. Kenton read the meaning of it accurately. This could be pleasant or stiff with antagonism; the choice was Kenton's.

He shook the hand, saying quietly, "You know damned well how long it's been, Sam." His gaze mechanically fell to Langerfels's shirt pocket.

Langerfels chuckled softly, pulling his lapel back; the tarnished sheriff's badge caught penciled streaks of sunlight. "Yes, I'm still wearing it, Frank."

Kenton said nothing. Langerfels studied him briefly. "How was it?"

"Like a beautiful dream. I enjoyed every minute."

"Yeah," Langerfels said dryly. "Now what did you really think, Frank?"

"All right, I'll tell you. I died every time I woke in prison and remembered where I was —every morning for six years. Is that what you wanted to know?"

Langerfels searched Kenton's dead eyes thoughtfully, and Kenton's closed face. "That's part of it. Now, what about Costain? He's still around, you know."

"I didn't know," Kenton said, his voice curiously flat and emotionless, "but it doesn't matter. So I hate his guts. So do a lot of people. You can make anything of that you like, Sam."

THE sheriff nodded pleasantly, but there was a perceptible tinge of ice to his voice. "All right, boy, I will. You keep away from Costain, hear?"

Kenton said, "You're a busy man, Mr. Langerfels. Don't waste time with a man who's reached a point of no return."

"It could be worse."

"Could it?"

"A man can start over. You're educated, Frank. There are plenty of fresh opportunities for someone like you."

"That may be," Kenton said, but there was a note of bitter conviction in his voice that Langerfels did not miss.

"What's sticking in your craw, boy?"

Kenton mentioned the attitude of the town.

Langerfels said, "We're not all like that. I'll not give judgment on what a man's been, only what he is. And that's so with other people in Trail, Frank. You'll see."

"And Carol?"

A faint startlement touched Langerfels's face, and Kenton thought, here's where he feels the pinch.

"Keep away from her, Frank. She's not for you."

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"I didn't think so."

"Wait a minute. I'm not looking down on you. But Carol could be hurt." Langerfels would not meet Frank's eyes squarely.

"I see," Kenton said, feeling a raw anger building in him. "I can start again all new, with everything except your daughter."

Langerfels's eyes lifted then, ice blue. "Make your start somewhere else, then. But keep away from Carol. Because if you don't, I'll run you out of Trail anyway." He turned on his heel and headed for his office.

Langerfels's harshness only hardened Kenton against any vestige of doubt still remaining about the job ahead. Kenton went to the livery, rented a nag, and headed out of town at a lingering gait. He was in no hurry. Now that he knew what he was going to do, there was a vast and fathomless reservoir of patience in him, even while his mood danced on the dark edge of violence.

The sound of a horse coming up fast behind him turned him in the saddle. Then he checked his horse and hauled around as Carol Langerfels came up side-saddle on a big-barreled appaloosa.

"Good day," Kenton said in a dry voice.

She asked, "Are you wondering why I'm here?"

"It's none of my business."

"I wanted to see you. Your coming back to Trail is no secret." Kenton considered that. If Costain knew of his return, there was trouble ahead.

She said softly, "And it's no secret that I've waited for you, Frank."

He had once courted this girl seriously, long ago, it seemed now, and far away. He said, "I'm touched, very touched. Only why?"

A startled hurt began in her expression. "Frank, nothing's changed."

"Everything's changed."

"Oh." His indifference summoned an undercurrent of anger to her voice. "What could make a man so hard?"

"Ask your old man. He put me in jail."

"To pay up, yes."

"To pay up for nothing," Kenton said coldly. "There are two sides to a penny. Let's turn it over. Suppose I didn't rob Costain's safe. Want to hear about that?"

"Yes, please."

"All right. Charlie Duneen, the banker, went out to Costain's Single Bit that day to foreclose an impending mortgage. He took me with him because he thought having a lawyer along would settle a lot of detail over legal points—in case Costain was of a mind to argue, which he always was.

"The three of us assembled in Costain's office. Charlie said there was no way Costain could hang onto his spread a day longer unless he had the money to pay in full now. An argument started and Costain pulled a gun out of his desk and shot Duneen. I went after Costain and he clouted me with the gun. I woke up in your old man's jail charged with robbing Costain's safe."

FRANK continued, "Then Herbelsheimer from the bank—who was next in line for the position vacated by Duneen—got on the stand at my trial and told two lies that invalidated my story of how Charlie died. One, he said that Duneen had gone to Arizona for his health and was taking a new position there, which explained Duneen's disappearance. Two, he claimed that Duneen couldn't have gone to Single Bit to foreclose on it because there was no record at the bank that they'd ever held any such mortgage.

"Naturally, that made my story of why I was at Costain's place look like an excuse to cover my real purpose there: to rob him. When a respected banking man and a big rancher say one thing, and an out-at-the-pants shyster says another, who is any right-thinking jury going to believe? Too, who would have better reason to commit robbery than a struggling lawyer who hadn't eaten a square meal in a month?"

"I remember. You told your story at the trial."

"You didn't believe it either, did you?"

Carol bit her lip. "But why, Frank? Why should Herbelsheimer lie?"

"He and Costain were always close friends. Also, Herbelsheimer stood to profit by Charlie's death. Why shouldn't he be grateful to the man who brought about his promotion to a better job? He did get Duneen's position, didn't he?"

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"Yes, he still has it. But why was Duneen's body never found?"

Kenton lifted his shoulders in a shrug. "*Quien sabe?* There are any number of gorges and wash-outs you can tumble a body in, and nature will do the rest."

"I believe you, Frank," Carol said quickly. "But where were you going now? Not to see Costain?"

"Why not? I had time to think of things—six years of it."

"Oh no, Frank! It isn't as though you had spent your life in prison."

"It isn't his fault I didn't."

"Strange," she said softly, "but I had thought you would be too big for hate."

"It's funny," he said almost musingly. "I thought so too. Only it isn't really Costain. It's a lot of things he kind of symbolizes."

"What things?"

He shrugged evasively. "Just a lot of things—that began around yesterday afternoon."

"Did Dad say something to hurt you?"

He shrugged. "What's the difference?"

Her mouth tightened. "I think you enjoy playing the martyr."

This struck too near the mark, and strangely it had the power to irritate Kenton. "Don't do that, Carol. Don't do that to me."

"You're doing it to yourself."

He looked at her, erect and lovely, and a terrible and mocking bitterness was suddenly on him. "I'm not young any more, Carol. I can't go back and start starving all over again. There's no life for you now with an ex-con."

She looked at him for a long five seconds. She said, "I remember when we were children. Life was so simple then. I was ten and you were fifteen, but all I thought of, even then, was that someday—it couldn't be any other way—that someday, we'd . . ." She bowed her head and could not go on.

"And live unhappily ever after. Is that it, Carol?"

"Frank, don't. This doesn't get us anywhere."

"Neither does talking."

"And you'll still try to get Costain?"

He said nothing. She looked at this tall cold-eyed man who was a stranger to her, and there was a small sob in her throat. "You'll have your pound of flesh, then, won't you?" A sudden passionate anger caught in her voice. "You fool, Frank!"

CAROL wheeled her horse and plunged it full tilt back for town. For a moment Kenton wanted to call after her, to tell her he had not meant to take this bitterness out on her, that he was not responsible for what he said because he was no longer a man but a husk, living now only to even scores with Will Costain.

On the road to Costain's Single Bit, the portly figure of the rancher bulked hatefully through the darkness in Frank's mind. He meant to make Will Costain sweat blood, to telescope into minutes the mental torture that had filled not minutes, but six wasted years, in the life of Frank Kenton. He spurred the livery horse, setting a brisk pace. Time would crowd him now, for Carol would tell her father of his intent, and Langerfels would hurry to prevent it.

On the wagon road, still a mile from Single Bit headquarters, Kenton sighted a light spring wagon. Nearing it, a strange smile shaped his straight mouth as he recogniged the driver. As the rig reached him, Kenton sidled his horse off the road as thought to let the other pass, then reached out and caught the headstall of one of the team, and stopped the wagon.

He reined in close to the driver, a hugely obese man whose massive legs almost split the trousers of his conservative brown suit. His eyes were blue-irised slits nearly hidden in the rolls of fat pouching his cheeks, his bristling yellow hair close-clipped so that his head sat his shoulders like a fat burr.

"A fine morning for a drive, banker Herbelsheimer."

The big man watched Kenton stolidly, incuriously, with no surprise.

"You don't know me?"

"Nor care to, *mein* friend."

"Look harder, Hans."

Herbelsheimer did, then nodded his massive head. "You've been away a long time, *Herr* Kenton."

"Why, you ought to know that," Kenton said. "You've come from seeing Costain, I'd

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say. You and he were always thicker than thieves, as I should know better than anyone."

Herbelsheimer gave him a look of pure, sustained hatred and fingered the reins uneasily. "What are you after, Kenton?"

"There's hell to pay, Hans, and I'm here to collect from Brother Costain."

The wariness in the banker's shrewd eyes heightened in sudden knowledge. *"Teufel!* You mean to give him no chance!"

Kenton nodded. "As much as he gave me."

Herbelsheimer's pink face puckered and he looked as though he were about to cry. The blood rushed to his heavy features. "But damn you, Costain is my friend!"

He flung an arm behind the wagon seat, coming up with a shotgun. Kenton hadn't seen it, and was caught off guard. He ripped open his coat, his hand diving to the shoulder holster and hauling out his gun just as Herbelsheimer let go with the shotgun.

The shot sprayed Kenton's left shoulder and he rolled back in the saddle, bringing his six-gun up.

It roared deafeningly, and Herbelsheimer dropped the shotgun and slid heavily down in his seat, holding his torn arm.

Kenton kept the gun trained loosely on the banker, feeling the hot blood, the hotter pain, running from his shoulder and down his own stiffening arm.

He said hollowly, "It's draw, Hans."

Tears squeezed from Herbelsheimer's pain-squinted eyes and rolled down his round cheeks.

"Damn you, Kenton," he said. He almost wept. "Damn you, Kenton. I'll see you in hell for this."

Kenton said savagely, "I'll be waiting for you on a bed of coals with a pitchfork."

He sheathed the gun and removed his hat, slashing with it at the nearest wagon horse's rump.

The team moved forward, carrying the slumped Herbelsheimer toward Trail and a doctor's care.

Kenton ripped his shirt open and tied his pocket bandanna on his shoulder. The bleeding and pain did not lessen. He headed on toward Single Bit and Will Costain.

HALF a mile from the ranch, Kenton left the wagon road where it crossed the slender meandering thread of Hackberry Creek, then followed the willow-choked creek bank to a grove of giant cottonwoods at the rear of the big Single Bit wagon shed. He sat his horse at the fringe of the grove, screened by a meager stand of brush, giving cold attention to the expanse of rolling park-like lawn surrounding the low stone ranch-house.

He saw it was deserted, and heard nothing but the clean measured tap of the blacksmith's hammer on the anvil, ringing distantly through the clear morning. His shoulder was filled with a tortuous sickening pain, but it could not stop him now.

Kenton half-hitched his horse to a tree and started across the open lawn toward the house. He was tense with the fear of being sighted, and ridden with the vicious angry urgency of knowing that Langerfels would be here soon, if Carol had told him.

Edging to an open window of the front room, he crouched in some low shrubbery. He fumbled his gun out with the hand of his good arm, listening warily. He heard footsteps entering the room.

"I'll have my coffee in the office, Martin." That was Costain's voice. "I have market reports to study. You stay here."

"Sure you'll be all right, Mr. Costain?" Martin's voice was a musical Texan drawl.

Costain laughed indulgently. "There is only one window opening on my office. I have a gun and I can watch one window, don't you think? I'll call you if anything happens."

Costain was scared enough to hire a bodyguard, Kenton thought, feeling a cold drawing-in of his muscles. He waited till he heard the door to the office close, then with painstaking caution took off his hat and raised his eyes just above the level of the window sill.

Martin, he saw, was sprawled in a comfortable leather chair, smoking, one booted foot propped on the arm while he leafed through a magazine. He was lean and unshaven, wearing often-patched range clothes, typical of the ragged earthy riffraff of rawhiders that drifted up from Texas. He wore a belted .45, and an old .40-.40 Henry leaned against the chair.

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Kenton sank down in a quandary. He had to take Costain by surprise to take him alive. And he wanted him alive for a while. But how could he do it, with Costain watching his office window and Martin guarding the front room onto which the office door opened? The sick blood pounded through Kenton's temples as he restlessly quested out what he knew of the layout of this house.

There was a kitchen and pantry to the rear,

"When sun move, me move."

for Costain liked to do his own cooking; a large bedroom; and, up front, the living room and Costain's office. Thoughtlessly, Kenton reached up to rub his stiff arm. His hand brushed his trousers pocket and the handful of pistol shells there. The suggestion of a crystallizing idea, a scheme in embryo, touched his mind. It would be a tall chance; but there was no time to consider alternatives.

He moved at a low-crouching run to the rear of the house, eased the back door open, and stepped inside. He stumbled on the door sill and almost fell. A living flame wracked his shoulder, paralyzing thought and muscle. He leaned against the wall for a moment. Take it slow he thought numbly, take it easy. Get him first then it won't matter.

Fighting down the nausea that gripped him, he moved to the iron stove in the corner and lifted the stovelid with infinite care. He set the lid down silently to one side, seeing, as he had hoped, a banked layer of glowing coals. He worked quickly to stir up the coals with the poker. Then, selecting a thin, narrow strip of kindling wood from the wood box by the stove, he emptied out his small handful of shells and laid them in a row on the wooden strip. He lowered them delicately onto the surface of red coals.

He returned silently and swiftly to the front room window and crouched there, listening tensely over the heavy strike of his heart, feeling a rising excitement mount to his tight nerves. When the crash of fire-touched gunpowder came from the kitchen, he heard Costain speak over it loudly.

"What's that?"

MARTIN left the front room to investigate. Now, Kenton thought. Gun ready, he slung a leg over the windowsill and stepped into the room. Nine fast steps took him to the office door. It was unlocked, and he stepped swiftly inside and closed it noiselssly behind him.

Only then did Costain, behind a big desk of expensive walnut, look up. His hands, on the desk, moved.

Kenton said in a voice of steel, "Don't."

Costain became motionless, watching as Kenton walked toward the desk. The man had not changed at all in six years. Costain was a gentleman rancher. A heavy, portly man in the black business suit of a well-to-do cattleman, he could at fifty-five have passed for forty. His black banjo eyes revealed nothing at all.

Kenton hooked a leg over the desk corner and sat there, his gun trained loosely on Costain.

"You know," the rancher said presently, "you won't leave this house alive, Frank."

"You won't either," Kenton said idly. "That's more important."

Costain said with a soft contemptuous smile, "You haven't the shadow of a chance, Frank. Give me the gun."

Kenton could see the small lance of fear playing behind his opaque eyes, and a wicked pleasure filled him. He thought, Costain's

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head is on the block now; he's cracking. Let him crack some more.

"You'll not go through with this."

"Ask Herbelsheimer."

Costain stiffened. "What about Herbelsheimer?"

Kenton didn't answer. He only watched the man's growing fear, and felt the strength draining from himself. Weary with pain, he thought, the hell with the pain. The hell with the blood. The thing now is to make Costain sweat.

There was a tap at the office door. Kenton half swiveled his gun toward it, with a curt nod at Costain.

"Yes?"

"Some bullets in the stove, I reckon, sir." That was Martin's drawl. "Some of your crew playing games."

"Yes. All right, Martin."

Kenton listened to Martin leaving the door, then smiled gently. "You did fine, Will. Fine."

"Frank, listen. I'll pay—pay any damn thing."

"You'll pay, my way. That's how it'll be."

Kenton saw Costain's face receding then in a giddy blur, and he silently called on a hidden reservoir of strength. He fought back the sickness and blackness, and the room swam back into focuse. He lifted his right hand from the desk without taking his gaze from Costain. The blood pooled thickly under his palm.

Costain began to babble. "Frank, I'll confess. I'll tell Langerfels—"

"About how you killed Duneen, eh?"

"About that, about anything!" Costain spoke in a frightened voice.

"Fine, Will. All right, Frank, drop it." The voice from the window at Kenton's back brought him half around. It was Sam Langerfels.

Weak from bloodloss, trying futilely to steady the gun, Kenton felt himself slipping down on the desk and knew belatedly that he had waited too long. His last conscious sight was of Costain clawing open a drawer of his desk and bringing up a pistol. Then it was as though a bright light were turned off, and Kenton thought he heard a gunshot before a roaring void of blackness filled his eyes and ears . . .

HE LAY in the big bed of the front corner room of the Langerfels house and listened to the sheriff talk:

"I was right behind you most of the way, Frank. I watched from the grove while you got inside the house. And I listened to you and Costain outside his office—every word."

"You could have picked me up at any time, then. Why didn't you?"

Langerfels smiled and scratched his graying head. "Why, when Carol told me about what you had in mind, I figured a jasper wouldn't get that het up against who put him in jail, even for six years, unless he had a good reason for thinking he didn't deserve it. So I waited. And it was a good thing I did."

"Yeah." Kenton stirred his bandage-stiff shoulder. "So what about Costain now?"

"I just winged him when he pulled that gun. Both he and Herbelsheimer will get a taste of what you got for six years. Only they'll both get life sentences for Duneen's killing. I doubt if they'll appreciate the diet." He paused with a trace of embarrassment, then added, "Apologies for those six years would sound cheap, Frank."

Kenton had already sensed the man's hurt, his regret; too, he had been making a fact-facing, self-searching appraisal of himself, did not like what he saw. He wondered now whether he would really have cold-bloodedly pulled that trigger on Costain.

And Carol? Hesitantly he put the question to Langerfels, who cleared his throat. "She waited for you for six years, with the town making a lot of rotten talk about a girl who'd wait for a con. And I gave her as much hell about it as any, I'm ashamed to say." The sheriff looked at Kenton with intent bright eyes. "She helped Doc Bishop fix your shoulder, but when you started coming to, she left the room. She said she didn't think you'd want to see her after what you'd said before."

He laid a hand on Kenton's arm, saying gently, "Be good to her, Frank. I'll ask no more than that."

"Sam?"

"What is it, son?"

"Please ask her to come in now."

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By BILL BURCHARDT

The LYNCHING

There was a thick, black-sleeved arm around Penny's waist

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at SIX-KILLER

THE shooting had slacked off an hour ago. Wyatt Archer bellied deep in moist blackjack leaf mold, sodden and uncomfortable, knowing his angle of fire was not good. The shanty, built of solid oak slabs, was a good seventy-five yards higher up the rise.

Archer watched the shack, shifting slightly as the clasp on his sheriff's star cut into his chest. A scattering of trees, slender post-oak and hickory, stood between him and the shack, not greatly obscuring his view, but occasionally deflecting a hurriedly thrown shot from his .30-.30 into the timber.

Whoever had chopped out this clearing had been half-hearted about it; a point that favored Dutch Louis, holed up yonder in the shanty. Wyatt Archer caught a glimpse of black against the dark interior of the shanty window, and threw a quick bullet at it.

That's Dutch Louis's black shirtsleeve, Wyatt thought. He ejected the empty shell and levered a cartridge into the chamber. The shot had furrowed splinters from the window sill. Wyatt listened to Dutch's cursing, wondering if he had hit the murdering outlaw, or if Dutch were just venting general displeasure.

Wyatt fired again, then told himself he was wasting lead. He was over-anxious to draw blood. As evening came on, Sheriff Wyatt Archer knew he had to make one of two bad choices.

He could let Dutch Louis go in the dark, after trailing him over rough country for forty-eight hours. Or, as dusk shut in, he could rush the shanty, kick in the door, and take his chances in a point-blank shooting match with a skilled and merciless killer. Neither prospect appealed to the wet, hungry, weary sheriff of Six-Killer County.

He glanced up then to re-locate Dutch Louis's roan gelding. It had grazed another ten yards into the timber. Wyatt could barely see it through the trees now. Dutch had just had time to dismount and leap into the shanty when Wyatt had stormed in here.

Louis's horse might have stood, but forty-eight hours of pushing, with little time to graze, had left it with too sharp an appetite. The horse moved slowly among the clumps of bunch grass, cropping at low, tender leaves.

SHERIFF ARCHER WAS having trouble catching the murderer, but Penny had no trouble at all catching the sheriff

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Dutch was bound to know his horse was straying, which might be why he was cussing. Wyatt grinned, tiredly as he swung his gaze back toward the shanty. Then the grin was gone, and his eyes were bugging out.

A girl was picking her way quietly through the clearing, approaching the shanty afoot. She was a pretty girl, dark haired, wearing a flat red hat and a fringed jacket of red suede. A braided leather quirt swung from her wrist, and the hand below it held a many-colored bouquet of wild timber flowers.

She was almost to the door and Wyatt opened his mouth to yell hoarsely, "Hey, you!"

The hoarse yell did it. Her hand was reaching for the latch when she heard. She gave one startled glance in Wyatt's direction, and then spun in through the door.

For a moment Wyatt let doubt and rage affect his common sense. Who was she, Dutch Louis's woman? Wyatt swore in anger. Then reason took hold. He knew better.

He could see her horse, a dappled gray mare, tied to a hickory sapling. His own and Dutch's horses were so hidden by the timber no one would have known they were there. The girl had not realized he and Dutch were here, Wyatt guessed.

Well, she sure wasn't alone now. Wyatt did not have long to wonder what he ought to do, for the shanty door slammed back and she was in the doorway. Her face was white now. There was a thick, black-sleeved arm around her small waist.

"You! Lawdog!" howled Dutch.

Wyatt could see the bleeding cut on Louis's cheek, where her quirt had bruised him.

Louis shouted, "All right! Don't say anything. Don't do anything either." The outlaw edged through the door behind the girl, and paused to locate his horse.

Wyatt waited until Louis was within feet of his roan gelding, then shouted, "Get out of there!" and fired a shot high through the leaves.

The roan stiffened and his eyes rolled white. Dutch Louis thrust the girl away, swung astride the horse, and sent it jumping for deep timber. As hoofs tore through the dry leaves of the timber floor, Wyatt ran across to the girl.

SHE was scared, and her face was deathly pale, but her eyes were flashing fire. "What is this?" she demanded furiously. Her quirt was cocked high over her right shoulder.

Wyatt held up beyond reach of the quirt. "You just had the honor of being held in the arms of the most wanted killer in the cross-timbers."

"What were you trying to do? Shoot through me to kill him?"

Wyatt's face tightened. "Why, no, ma'am. I just shot high, trying to scare his horse."

"I heard that bullet whistle past my ear," she said.

"You aren't that tall," Wyatt answered. "And your ears aren't that long."

"Yours ought to be as long as a jackass's!"

Wyatt saw tears in her eyes as she elbowed past. "Now look here, miss," he said, "I've had two hard days following that skunk, and just when I got him cornered here you sprung him loose."

"When you corner him again," the girl said, "make it somewhere besides a 2-Twister line shack. We didn't build these places to be used for lawmen's games."

"Now, look here!" Wyatt reached for her elbow. She snatched her arm away.

"You look!" Tear streaks were pale on her cheek as she glanced back over her shoulder. "I'm going, and don't you raise a hand to stop me!"

She stamped determinedly to the dappled mare, mounted, and spurred away. The sheriff got hold of himself then in a hurry. He had some serious work to do. So I'm on Cyclone Garst's 2-Twister range, he thought.

Mounted, he waited until the soft timber floor and distance had swallowed the sound of the girl's horse. Then he listened some more. There was need to stalk with the utmost caution here. Dutch Louis could be in the gathering dark of any thicket, in the shadow of any overhanging rock.

The timber at night was a place of few sounds—the wash of wind through high branches, the dismal woo-woo-woot of an owl. As the moon rose high and silvery, Wyatt hunted with endless patience and care. Occasional sign was readable—where hurrying hoofs had upturned damp timber mulch in a

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moonlit clearing; where brush hung new-broken.

Mostly, Wyatt dozed fitfully in the saddle, waiting for light, thinking of things he could have said to that girl if he'd just thought quickly enough. He could have told her that he knew old Cyclone Garst, but where did she come in? That old reprobate was past sixty, and had lived alone since his wife died, twenty years ago.

Mostly, Wyatt should have said, "Young lady, you just had sudden death hugging you around the neck. Dutch Louis wouldn't hesitate to kill you if you caused him trouble. Being pretty wouldn't slow him. He's killed one pretty girl."

Half-dozing, Wyatt could see vividly that bank lobby in Gore. Dutch Louis had killed Lucius Barstow because he had reached for a gun in a desk drawer. He had killed Lucius's daughter because she ran to her father, then sprang for the door to get help.

Jenny Barstow had been pretty, and that hadn't slowed Dutch Louis's trigger finger any. The bank had been robbed, and was closed now, too, because both Barstow and Jenny were dead. There was nobody to run the bank.

Wyatt had been on the trail of the murderer for two days. Wyatt was aching tired, but he figured Dutch must be just as tired. The sheriff dozed, resting his horse. With the first faintness of dawning day he began to push the trail harder.

Dutch was working down country, toward Terrapin Creek, out of Six-Killer County—out of Wyatt's jurisdiction. Thoughtful at the prospect of losing this killer, Wyatt half turned his horse back toward Cyclone Garst's 2-Twister. He could get help there.

Then he forced himself to face the plain fact that a good part of his wanting to head into 2-Twister was a desire to look at that girl again. He would lose a day getting there. Dutch Louis would probably get across Terrapin Creek anyway; he was a cinch to do it if Wyatt detoured past 2-Twister headquarters.

WYATT pulled up on a high hog-back rise, took off his hat, and mopped a sweatband moist now in the heat of the rising sun. Far below he saw a bunch of young horses, herded by a lone skewbald stud, grazing along a narrow cut of valley grass.

He watched, envying that peacefulness, then drew his attention back to the long roll of country before him. He squinted hard at the dark cut in the hills from which Terrapin Creek issued. There were ten intervening saw-tooth miles of timbered ridges. Time was running out.

Wyatt sat thinking. There were half a dozen trails out of this wilderness. Most likely, Louis would head for the railroad, the M. K. & T. Probably, too, he'd head for the biggest town, where there'd be less chance of identification by some ticket agent. That would be Muscogee. To get there Dutch could head down the wagon road, or stay on the ridges and work down to Six-Killer ferry.

It was as good a chance one way as the other. Wyatt let some deep manhunter's instinct choose Six-Killer ferry. A decision made, he cut away from the easily followable trail, tracing out a mental sketch of the quickest way to the creek crossing.

Noon found Wyatt afoot in a crevice of limestone rock cut out by some ancient upheaval. His horse was lathered and blowing, its knees quivering. Below him twisted the rough rambling bed of Terrapin Creek.

The whole lay of the country funneled in here through these limestone cliffs. If Dutch Louis had come slowly enough to attempt to cover his trail, Wyatt figured he had circled him. There was fatalism in his manner as he hunkered down in the great rock crack. His horse was tied to a rock splinter five yards away.

He could see almost a half mile up-creek, where the rock-strewn stream bed came down out of the ridges, dry now, but a roiling torrent in the rainy season. The stream seemed reluctant to take the precipitous plunge off the limestone cliff to Wyatt's right; instead it turned downgrade here before him, following an easier, though still swift, path into the broad valley below.

Through rifts in the trees, Wyatt could see the miniature rails of the M. K. & T. far below, like thin silver hairs laid down on toothpicks. The rise and fall of this rugged country was marked by many a sheer limestone precipice like this one beside Wyatt's rocky perch—

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plunging layers of white stone gouged out by some crushing glacier of the ice age.

He relaxed patiently, deciding to wait this afternoon, and tonight, and another day. Somewhere, far away, a rock fell and struck rock, and fell again, tumbling with a dry clack and rattle until it lodged and became silent.

Wyatt Archer pulled deeper into his crevice, took off his hat, and fixed his gaze on the place where Terrapin Creek issued from the slope to the northwest. He watched Dutch Louis come out of the crevice, holding his horse in hard, sidling and sure-footed.

Louis dislodged more rocks, and their falling grew to a considerable clatter before the outlaw reached the level of the creek. Here he straightened his horse and came ahead at a comfortable jog.

Wyatt lifted his rifle and rested it before him. Carefully, deliberately, he found Louis's open-shirted chest in the gun's sights. The man was in easy rifle range. Wyatt waited. There was no use shooting too soon, when every step Dutch's horse took was in Wyatt's favor.

The urge to kill simmered, and cooled, and came slowly under Wyatt's control as he watched the unwary outlaw come on. Wait until he is directly below, Wyatt thought, and then speak to him quietly. Dutch could easily be alarmed into making a fight, when he was this near freedom.

Suddenly, Wyatt wanted in the worst way to take the outlaw alive. It would be certain death for Dutch Louis if he chose to shoot it out here. Wyatt grinned eagerly. He could put a dozen slugs in Dutch Louis's paunch before the outlaw knew what was happening.

Wyatt squinted. He eased his rifle and lifted his eyes from the sights. This would be a mirage, some queer trick of prismed light rays glancing off white rocks through the heat. But it was no trick, no mirage.

IT WAS a girl in a flat red hat and a red suede jacket, sitting a small dappled gray mare. She rode up out of the hollow below into the creek bed, directly between Wyatt Archer and Dutch Louis.

Wyatt felt a slow, broiling scald of rage, and for an instant he held her in his sights for the sheer pleasure of knowing how easy it would be to remove this small trouble-making female. How, out of endless leagues of timber and hills, had she managed to choose this place?

It came again to Wyatt that perhaps there was design in this. Terrapin Creek was the boundary; here lay a chance for freedom for Dutch. And here was the girl, waiting for Dutch, perhaps. But Wyatt could not make himself believe it; she was too pretty and unspoiled.

She pulled up now to look upstream, and she saw Dutch Louis. Wyatt knew then that there was no purpose to this meeting. Both Dutch and the girl froze, immobile, for a long-held moment. Then she whirled the mare and plunged down the rocky fill toward Wyatt.

Wyatt could almost read Dutch Louis's mind. Beyond this creek lay Muscogee, the railroad, a ticket to Kansas City. He had a bank's money in his saddlebags. Why not a pretty girl to share his celebration?

Wyatt saw him drive his spurs, and the little dappled mare was no match for the sprint and stride of Louis's long-legged gelding. As they came together toward Wyatt's ambush, he could only momentarily distinguish one from the other in his rifle sights.

Wyatt lay biting his lip in frustration as he watched Dutch Louis again enjoying a free ride to freedom. The frustration became uncertain then. Wyatt stood up. Surely the girl knew the lay of this country.

If she did not, Dutch ought to. Yet both were riding unchecked for the limestone cliff, beyond the fringe of trees that bordered Wyatt's concealment. Perhaps panic had unnerved her. Maybe Dutch was riding blind. They were riding toward a plunge into space, to bone-crushing death.

Wyatt Archer shook himself to action. He leaped, grabbing his saddle horn, pulling loose his thirty-foot riata. Through the corner of his eyes, he saw Dutch Louis burst past the girl and draw taut his reins. Dutch's intent to turn and block her off was too late.

Wyatt flipped open a narrow two-foot loop, caught the hondo, and threw the rope. Dutch was almost beyond him now, but the opening loop settled and caught above the swarthy outlaw's shoulders.

Startled, Dutch reached to flip the loop

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away. And at that instant the chest of the girl's mare hit the tautening rope. The dappled mare was thrown into a rump-dragging slide. Dutch Louis was torn off his horse as if he had been snatched by a giant whiplash.

Rope zinged, whipping wire tight, as Louis's hurled body reached the end of its arc and disappeared over the limestone precipice. Wyatt paused to see if the rope would hold. Then he climbed down to help the girl.

She came slowly to her feet, swaying, and Wyatt reached to steady her. She lay against his chest with a deep sigh, her eyes dizzily unfocussed. Wyatt held her silently until he felt her stir.

Then he said, "Girl, you have a downright genius for being in the wrong place! Who are you, and what are you doing here?"

Some of the fire was returning to her eyes. "I'm Penny Garst, and this is 2-Twister range."

"Are you visiting old Cyclone?"

"He's my grandfather. I climbed up here to hunt a herd of 3-year-old horses he wants to break for roundup."

WYATT abruptly recalled the lone skewbald stud and the young horse herd he'd sighted that morning. "Why, I reckon I saw the very bunch you're hunting. Penny, I want to talk to your grandfather. I'll ride back with you. Between us, we ought to be able to drive the horses in, and save Cyclone from sending a crew up here after them."

The fire in her eyes became a gentle and somewhat tired twinkle. "Maybe you can keep me out of trouble, too."

Still holding her arms, Wyatt said earnestly, "I'd like to try."

"Grandpa would like that," she said. "But what about—" she shuddered as she glanced toward the cliff—"him?"

Wyatt drew his eyes away from the most tempting pair of lips he'd ever seen, and stepped to the edge of the limestone shelf. Dutch Louis was swinging there, hanged neatly and professionally.

Wyatt went back. "Maybe," he suggested gravely, "if I help bring in those horses, your grandfather will oblige by sending someone up here to bring Dutch in. They can find him easily, by watching the buzzards."

She was shuddering again, so Wyatt took her in his arms until she became calm. He got his horse then, cutting the rope loose from the saddle horn and securing it to the rock splinter that had held his reins.

He retrieved the bank loot from Dutch's saddle bags, then unsaddled the roan gelding and turned it loose.

As Wyatt rode off beside Penny Garst, he said thoughtfully, "By tunket, I'll bet this is the smallest vigilante party that ever operated in Six-Killer County. I reckon you'd have to say it was a one-man job."

Penny Garst was still shuddering so violently that Wyatt spurred his horse near hers and put his arm around her again. He could see that it might take a good deal of his time from now on, just keeping this girl calm and easy in her mind.

KNOW YOUR WEST

(Answers to the questions on page 47)

1. Missouri River.
2. Tribes or branches of tribes of Indians.
3. To drag with a rope or chain.
4. The middle of the street.
5. Montana.
6. That the foreman gave him his orders, laid down the law to him, or maybe bawled him out.
7. By the way their tepees were set up, each tribe having its own distinctive method.
8. Forts.
9. TOO-lace is the correct Spanish pronunciation, but most westerners say TOO-lees. *Tules* means reeds, sometimes also applied to yucca.
10. About 25.

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WHOM SHALL I MARRY?

by Professor MARCUS MARI

THE SIGN ARIES
MARCH 21—APRIL 20

GREAT and turning-point events in people's lives have a strange way of happening under the same star-pattern. For instance, if you were born under Aries, you are quite likely to discover, if you check back, that many, if not most, of the important happenings of your life have taken place under the configuration of Aries. Try checking back; you'll find it fascinating.

Look at Maximilian of Mexico. He was born under the sign of Gemini and everything of moment that ever happened to him did so under the sign of Gemini. He was born Archduke of Austria, brother of Emperor Francis Joseph, on July 6th, 1832—just after Gemini begins to sink into Cancer. He was sent to be the emperor of Mexico, and arrived to take over his new kingdom on June 12th, 1864—Gemini was then high in the heavens.

The Mexicans finally rebelled, and he was court-martialed and shot on June 19th, 1867—Gemini on that date was ruling the sky.

Watch your month of birth! Isn't it usually the time that changes in your life have taken place? Check with your friends about their birth months. It is actually not so odd at all—as a good many people have remarked—that so many famous ones have been born, have married, and died in their horoscopic sign.

It is your star-ruling period.

You may receive a personal reading by sending this coupon to Professor Mari in care of Ranch Romances, 10 East 40th Street, New York 16, N. Y. ENCLOSE STAMPED AND SELF-ADDRESSED ENVELOPE. (Canadians enclose three cents instead of stamp.)

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She tried to walk past, but Kirb caught her arm

His Own Law

By Will Cotton

JOSIE COULDN'T understand that sometimes a man had to stand alone . . . to do his own fighting, no matter what the odds against him

KIRB HAWLES hooked his thumbs in his gun belt. He tilted the chair on its back legs and rested his shoulders against the wall. Watching Sheriff Rainey with cool gray eyes, Hawles said slowly, "I'll handle it my own way. I don't need the law to bungle things up."

Sheriff Rainey's chair squeaked as he swiveled around to face Hawles. About forty, he looked older, with deep lines cut in his weathered face.

"You haven't any choice," he said, measuring his words carefully. "The law's already in. You sold rustled beef cows to the rail camp, and Parkinson is due in tomorrow. Parkinson's a powerful man down below. And he's in the right. They were his cows."

Kirb took out a sack of tobacco. He

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sprinkled some in the paper, rolled it and licked the edge thoughtfully. "I got into this," he said. "I'll get out. Parkinson will be paid off, if it takes every cent I have. What more does he want?"

Rainey bobbed his head. He seemed tired. "Son, I believe you, maybe just because I want to. But you haven't answered yet what I asked before. Where did you get those cows?"

Lighting his smoke, Hawles let the legs of the chair come down hard on the floor. He got to his feet and stood there a moment, his broad shoulders hunched a little, looking down at Rainey.

"Like I said, I'll handle this my own way."

"I could make you a deputy, if it would help."

"It wouldn't help."

He turned away then and walked to the door. His spurs jangled against the planking. He thought, I don't like to treat Rainey this way. But Rainey doesn't understand.

As he was pulling open the door, he heard the chair squeak again, and then the sound of Rainey getting up. "If you're going to be stubborn, son, maybe I have to treat you as if I didn't believe you," Rainey was saying. "I don't want to—especially on account of Josie."

Without looking around, Hawles said, "You're the sheriff. You figure it out."

Unhitching his paint, Kirb Hawles swung into the saddle and rode down the main street into the plaza. He tied up before the Green Front. The raucous noises from the saloon carried out into the night; the rough easy-going sounds of men who were drinking hard.

You could hear the tinkle of a piano above the other sounds, and a girl singing shrilly. He crossed the board walk and pushed open the batwings, remembering only as he stepped inside that he had promised to see Josie that evening. But he didn't want to just then.

He elbowed his way through the crowd of railroad workers, punchers from the outlying ranches, and townsmen, until he managed to find a place at the bar. Staring moodily into the mirror, he waited with a foot on the brass rail until Freddie brought him a bottle and an empty glass. Hawles tossed a coin on the mahogany. He couldn't hear it ring above the noises around him.

"I'm looking for your boss, Freddie."

The bartender wiped a hand on his dirty apron.

"He isn't around. He hasn't been around all night."

Pouring himself a drink, Hawles twisted around so that he could see the small stage at the far end of the saloon. A girl in red tights was dancing to the music of the piano. Through the haze of smoke, her features seemed soft and lovely and her lips, parted in a fixed smile, vividly inviting.

Kirb drained his glass. He waited until she was finished before he turned back and refilled his glass from the bottle. He heard whistles and stamping feet mingling with the clapping. When he looked around again, the girl was bowing and throwing a kiss to her audience.

He set his glass down and worked his way toward the stage, reaching it just as the girl was coming off the platform. She saw him, but she pretended she hadn't. She tried to walk past him.

He caught her arm.

"Don't, Kirb," she protested, trying to pull away. "I've got to go and change."

"You're not in that much of a hurry," he said. "How about a drink?"

Close to, her features were harsh and angular under the heavy makeup. Kirb wondered what he had ever seen in her. But that had been a long time ago, before he had come to know Josie.

She was biting her lower lip. "I don't want a drink."

He said roughly, "Isn't it the custom of the house?"

"I don't want a drink with you, Kirb."

He was still holding her arm, and he pulled her around to face him. He thought, it really doesn't hurt any more, what she did to me. Because it hadn't been any good, even at the beginning.

He said in a low tone. "What you mean, Belle, is that you don't want Bart Temple to see us. But Freddie says Bart hasn't been around. I just want to know where Bart is now."

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SHE was breathing heavily. A dribble of perspiration had smeared the makeup around her eyes. "Kirb, you'd better get out of here," she said. "I really mean that."

"Tell me where I can find Bart."

He was aware that his fingers were digging too hard into her flesh. He started to relax his hold. Her eyes were widening. It was as if fear had suddenly possessed her. Hawles could feel her body tensing.

She whispered hoarsely, "I don't know."

And then someone grabbed Hawles from behind and spun him around. "She doesn't know, like she says."

It was Red Galt, Bart Temple's top gunhand.

"I want to see your boss," Hawles said levelly.

"Maybe he doesn't want to see you. I suggest you get out of Bart's place and stay out."

Hawles grinned at him. He could sense the crowd backing away from around them. The hush that had fallen made the shuffle of boots seem strangely ominous.

"I drink where I like, Red. Tell Bart I want to see him."

Red Galt wasn't buying any. He stood facing Hawles, a good two hundred pounds of muscle and bone, with sparse red hair parted down the middle of a head that seemed too small for his big body.

"I'm warning you, Hawles, get out and leave Belle alone."

"I heard you the first time."

He didn't expect what happened then. Red Galt, for all his size, moved with a fluid rapidity. His fist cracked hard against the side of Hawles's face, snapping his head half around and sending a darting pain through his skull.

He stumbled back, slamming into a table. He was trying to straighten up when Red Galt drove knuckles into his kidney. He felt as if his spine had cracked. He doubled up, then went down on one knee. Trying to fight his way up, he took a blow to the mouth. He could taste the salt of spurting blood, while a red fog swirled in his brain.

He couldn't see as he moved forward, swinging arms that no longer seemed to have any strength in them. He felt his knuckles crunch as he slammed them against bone. He swung again, trying to put his shoulder behind it. He could hear a man's heavy breathing, but his vision was only a blur of running shapes and colors, and he knew he had missed.

He sucked in his breath, trying to keep down the nausea that was growing within him. Then a hammer cracked his jaw, splitting it apart, and the rushing blood choked him. A light flashed suddenly in his brain and then went out.

As he was falling, he heard Bart Temple's voice saying:

"That'll teach him."

Then he didn't hear anything more except the shuffle of boots against the floor.

As he tossed feverishly, he remembered many things, like that day when he had gone running to his father, sobbing out the story of how his older brother had thrashed him. He could still see the funny look in his old man's eyes before he turned away, saying, "A feller's got to fight his own battles, son." His father walked away, leaving Kirb with that futile lonely feeling, knowing what his old man meant, yet not liking it. The next time, he had given his brother back all he could, and there weren't any more scraps between them.

And later, when the old man and the brother were dead, there was the time Andros wanted the poor holdings his mother and he lived on. It was not much of a shack, and worse land, but it was all the old man had left them. Andros wanted it because the railroad was coming through. Kirb, deep in his heart, had wanted to sell out. He knew what manner of man Andros was, and he was afraid.

But his mother, tired and worn from the hard frontier life, had told them that this was her home. She didn't want to leave it.

He had settled with Andros over flaming guns, knowing that was the final answer, the only answer. Later, the railroad had chosen another route. Kirb would build a finer, more comfortable ranch house there one day, because he had won the right, through his own effort. He would pay back Bart Temple that way.

His thoughts were interrupted by the tap

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of shoes outside the room. He rose up on his elbows as Josie came in, bringing a tray with a bowl of soup on it.

"Better?" she asked, as she set the tray down on the bed beside him.

He looked up at her, into the serious gray eyes. The black hair falling around her face glistened in the early forenoon sunlight. She was wearing a simple cotton dress, caught in around the waist with a leather belt, so that the skirt flared and the bodice was pulled tight over her full breasts.

He said, "I'm okay," trying to sound casual, so that she wouldn't know the excitement her being near caused him.

Her lips parted a little. It wasn't exactly a smile. "Always playing a role," she said. "The strong, hard man who lives within himself. Doesn't it get tiresome?"

He felt blood flushing his cheeks. "I make out."

He didn't like her taunting him. He moved a little, picking up the spoon and sampling the broth. His jaw hurt when he swallowed. She drew up a chair and sat watching him, her forehead wrinkling a little, while he ate slowly.

At length she asked, "Why do you have to be that way, Kirb?"

"What way?"

"The way you are. You know you'd have been killed if my father hadn't showed up. But you won't tell him why you got into the fight. You won't let him help. It's his job."

HE SAID slowly, "It's my job. Your father's the sheriff. He can keep peace if he wants to. But I learned a while back that a man has to look out for himself. I mean to do that."

He had finished eating, and laid the spoon down on the tray. Josie got up and moved the chair back.

"Do you know where that leaves me?" she said, her voice rising a little. "I like you, Kirb Hawles—maybe too much for my own good. But I don't want a man who has no faith in anyone but himself."

He said sharply,

"You wouldn't want a coward, either, Josie. This is my medicine."

She stamped her foot impatiently. "You think just because it happened to you, it doesn't affect anyone else," she told him, her eyes flashing. "But it does. Don't you see that breaking the law harms everyone, not just the victim? You had to pay back Parkinson for the rustled cows. But the rustler is still loose, free to steal more, while you're getting better, so you can have your own personal revenge."

She caught up the tray.

"Josie," he called out to her.

But she went away without looking at him.

He lay back against the pillow, anger heavy in the pit of his stomach. What she said seemed to make sense, but it was only partly true. He had learned living in a rougher, more bitter school. She should understand that.

He had to believe in himself. He had to work things out his own way. If not, what else could he believe in? Yet he saw, feeling a stab of pain that had nothing to do with the beating he had taken, that she would never be reconciled to his way of thinking—nor he to hers.

He threw back the blanket and swung his legs tentatively over the edge of the bed. It was unthinkable for him to remain here in the Rainey's house. Their ideas were too different from his.

When he stood up his head felt light and giddy. For a moment he had to reach down and steady himself against the bed. Then the feeling passed. He drew on his levis, buttoned his shirt, and found his boots under the bed. His gun belt hung from a peg on the wall. He fastened it around his waist loosely, so that the holster hung easily against his left thigh.

Josie had said Bart Temple might strike again at someone else. So he had better find Bart and finish things before that happened. Then Josie would have no reason to quarrel with him. He left the room, moving slowly because his knees felt disjointed and he wasn't sure he could walk fast without falling.

A few minutes later, Sheriff Rainey was looking up at him, startled.

"Got my hat somewhere, Sheriff?"

"You aren't fit to be leaving, son."

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"I'm going, anyhow."

He thought, in the silence that followed, that he could hear someone sobbing somewhere in the house. It was very soft, so he couldn't be sure.

"We have an idea who was behind that deal you were mixed up in," Rainey said, running a hand over his chin. "I have a man out checking on it now. My advice is to leave things where they belong, in the hands of the law."

"Yeah. I heard you before."

Rainey shrugged, muttering something under his breath.

"I was looking for my hat," Kirb said.

"Listen, darling. They're playing our song!"

Rainey grinned. "You won't be needing it, where you're going."

Hawles shifted unsteadily. He suddenly felt very weak. Bringing his hand up, he wiped at the sweat that had come out on his forehead.

"I don't get you, Sheriff," he said slowly.

"You're going to the jailhouse, son. You're under arrest for selling rustled cows and for obstructing justice."

To Hawles, the sheriff's words seemed to have no reality. He ran the tip of his tongue over his lower lip and stared at Rainey, swaying a little, while the room went out of focus and the dizziness swirled in his brain. He was barely conscious that Josie had come in and was watching him, and that Rainey had risen out of his chair.

Kirb said hoarsely, "You throwing me in the jailhouse?"

He took a step toward Rainey. He was trying to bring up his right arm. He had no thought, no plan, nothing except the certainty that he had to get out of this place.

He heard Josie cry out abruptly, and he saw the glint on the gun Rainey was holding. Then he pitched forward, crashing to the floor. He struggled to get up, wondering if this were some bad dream. Then, when he was on his knees, his mind suddenly cleared and he knew it wasn't a dream.

"Rainey," he said savagely, the anger curdling his whole being, "you're going to be sorry for this."

Rainey didn't have the gun out any more. He came over and tried to help Hawles up. Kirb shook him away. He managed to get to his feet himself.

"I'm not going to forget," Hawles said flatly.

"I wouldn't want you to," Rainey told him. "I wouldn't want you to forget."

IT WAS his second day in the jailhouse. Kirb paced back and forth across the cell, his boots ringing out sharply against the floor of hard-packed earth. His hands were bunched into tight fists. Then he threw himself down on the bunk and lay panting, his eyes closed against the sunlight that streamed through the barred window into his face.

He heard a movement outside, but it wasn't Rainey and it wasn't Kop Singer, who brought him his food. He could tell that from the sounds. He lay there paying no attention, until a girl's voice calling his name broke the silence. He sat up, then, running a hand through his hair.

"What are you doing here, Josie?" he asked, not looking at her.

"I wanted to see you," she said simply.

"Like a monkey in a cage," he suggested bitterly.

He heard her gasp, but still he kept his gaze averted.

"Well, look at me."

He swung around, and found her just out-

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side the bars, one hand resting on her hip, the other carrying a small package.

"Maybe you're satisfied now," he said roughly. "You and your old man."

She said, "You don't have to talk like that, Kirb. I'm not here to visit a zoo."

Her face looked tired, he thought. He was sorry he had talked to her the way he had. Her nearness was stirring up the excitement in him again. The bench creaked as he stood up. He walked over to where she was standing, very conscious of the bars that separated them.

"Josie," he said now, his voice soft but gruff, "you'd better forget me."

Her eyes shone. "I wish I could. Can you forget me?"

"Why not?"

"We love each other."

He reached out between the bars, found her hand, and pulled it to him. It was warm and soft in his. He bent down and brushed it quickly with his lips. Then he let it drop. "It won't work, Josie. You and I come from different worlds, and we have different ideas. So it won't work."

"It could work," she said.

He was suddenly defensive. "Your old man sent you here to make me talk. I should have known."

She drew back, her shoulders squaring. He saw the way her breasts heaved. "That's not true. He doesn't even know I'm here."

Kirb said roughly, "Sure, I believe you."

She bit her lip. "Kirb, I brought you something—a cake I baked."

"I'm much obliged, ma'am. Feeding the animals in their cages—that's a nice gesture."

She shoved the package under the grating and fled down the corridor. He watched her retreating form as long as he could, cursing himself silently. Then he kicked the package across the floor. He let it stay there, not opening it.

He lay on his bunk. There was a faint light from the moon seeping in through the window. Outside, the night was quiet, as if the town were deserted.

Lying there, he thought a lot. He knew he had been a fool in the first place to buy that beef from Bart. If he had half a brain, he would have realized it. But it had sounded like a good deal, and he had been thinking of Josie, too. The beef was cheap; Bart had said he was taking it over from the widow of a rancher. Bart would have sold it himself, only he was too busy to arrange driving the bunch to the rail camp. That wasn't his line, anyway.

So Hawles had picked up some men and met Bart at the edge of the Salem hills. The cows were solid, sleek. Bart had already trail-branded them. It took a week to complete the drive, and the profit was good enough to enable Kirb to start rebuilding the ranch. That made him hope he wouldn't have to put off for too long asking Josie to marry him.

But the night Kirb had returned to town he'd stopped into the Green Front for a drink. He'd talked to Belle briefly, and something she said made him suspicious. But he hadn't known, for sure, until Rainey had asked him to drop into his office for a chat.

It was easy to see, now, that the cards he'd played were wrong; easy to see that he was making things even worse between himself and Josie by the way he'd acted. But you can only play a hand once. When the cards were down, it was over, a new deal. Maybe, in the next hand, he'd be smarter.

From somewhere outside, he heard the sudden crack of an exploding gun, followed by other shots, men shouting, and the sudden clatter of hoofs. He went at the window, trying to see out, but it was too high. The shooting died, but the cries of the men continued, growing louder.

He was at the grill of his cell, gripping the iron bars, when he heard the commotion outside the jailhouse. Then boots beat on the floor of the corridor, and Kop Singer came along with a lantern, followed by a group of men. Kop unlocked the door to the cell next to Hawles's, and two men were pushed in. They were screaming oaths as Kop turned the key.

In the half light, Hawles could see Sheriff Rainey among the men crowded outside the cell. Then Kop flashed the lantern on the two new prisoners. Hawles sucked in his breath. In the next cell were Bart Temple and his gunman, Red Galt.

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SEEING them, Kirb felt a tightening in his guts. He reached through the bars and caught Rainey's sleeve. "Why are you bringing in Bart and Red?"

Rainey shook himself free. "I thought you might like company."

Hawles felt defeated. He had wanted to go after Bart himself, and pay back Red Galt for the beating he had taken. Now they were in the cell next to his.

"Let me out," he shouted at Rainey, hardly realizing what he was saying. Someone laughed at him.

"You'll get out," Rainey answered, "when your time comes."

It was morning. Hawles had slept little. He got up and sloshed some water on his face from the bucket in the corner of the cell. He could look through the bars and see Bart still sleeping. Red Galt was sitting on the edge of his cot. His face was bruised, one eye puffed and closed. He glanced at Kirb, then spat on the floor.

Hawles went back to his bunk. His foot kicked the package Josie had brought him the day before, and he took it up, idly untied the string, and opened the cardboard box. Inside was a small round cake, frosted white.

Food for the animals, he thought, and threw it on the floor. The cake broke open. He went over and stamped his heel on it, and was surprised at the metallic grinding underfoot as he did so. Stooping over, he picked up the cake and scraped the metal object—a key—clean. He stood there, weighing the key in his hand, staring at it, wondering if it would unlock his cell door. Then his hand closed over it and he shoved it into the pocket of his jeans. He was smiling as he turned around.

"What you got?" Red Galt asked thickly, his unhurt eye sharp and cold.

Hawles ignored him. He stretched out on the bunk, feeling warm and good to know that Josie had done this for him. He had been wrong about her. He would never be harsh to her again. He'd have to let her know how he felt.

He heard mumbling in the next cell, and then Bart was at the bars. He was a tall man, thin, with a long nose and no eyebrows.

Bart said softly, "Red tells me you have a key. You can do us all a favor."

"Like the favor you did me?" Hawles asked.

"That was bad luck. Some man down at the rail camp must have heard of Parkinson's losing his cows, and got too nosey. It wasn't my fault."

"Glad to know that."

Bart scowled. "Anyway, since you have a key, we could make it tough for you and whoever brought it, just by passing on the word. You wouldn't want that?"

Hawles grunted. "You're smart, Bart. How did you guess?"

Bart's lips twisted. "We can get out tonight. You won't be sorry."

Hawles kicked his boots off and rolled over. He said, "I'll think about it, Bart, since you're going to do me a favor."

The day crawled by with infinite slowness. Kop Singer brought coffee and bread for breakfast, then later some soup for lunch. The light from the barred window gradually moved across the floor.

It was almost dark when Sheriff Rainey came and unlocked the door to Hawles's cell. He motioned to Hawles to follow him down the corridor. Bart Temple and Red Galt were standing at the bars, watching him curiously. Hawles looked back and grinned at them.

In his office, Rainey motioned Hawles to a chair. He himself sat behind his desk, looking at the ceiling and massaging his chin with his hand.

"I have plenty of time," Hawles said after a while.

Rainey glanced at him with suddenly narrowed eyes.

"I'm wondering," he said. "Maybe I shouldn't do what I'm going to. But with Bart and Red jailed, I reckon there's no reason to hold you any longer. The law's done its job. You're free."

Hawles let his eyes drop to the floor. He felt cheated out of what had been rightfully his, the chance to go after Bart Temple in his own way.

"Reckon I should thank you," he remarked.

"It's not necessary. I haven't told Josie; I thought you might like to do that yourself."

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"I'll look her up."

Rainey bent his head over his desk. He began to shuffle papers. Hawles walked out into the twilight, knowing that somehow this couldn't be the end—not for him.

HE TOOK out the key and put it on the table.

"Why did you bring me that, Josie?" he asked. "It could have meant trouble for you."

He heard her sigh. The lamp on the table flickered, making running shadows across her face. She didn't look up from her sewing.

"I figured you had to find out in your own way, and that if you were free you'd have that chance."

"Enough rope to hang myself?"

"Sort of. You can't be argued with."

"It was too late. Your father caught up with Bart before I could."

She paused, holding the needle before her. The knuckles of her fingers were dead white. "So you'll never learn, maybe."

"Don't reckon I want to."

"You will sometime, when it's too late."

He felt the strain mounting between them. He wished it didn't have to be that way. Awkwardly, he reached out and tried to take her hand, but she drew it away.

She said flatly, "It's no use, Kirb. Let's not try to pretend otherwise."

He got up, a flush creeping up the back of his neck. "Maybe it's you who's stubborn," he told her harshly. "Maybe I've been wasting time all along." He left her, not looking back.

The anger drove in on him, so that he shoved into the night with a mounting restlessness, a churning fury, within him. When he reached the plaza he heard the sounds from the Green Front, and he thought that what he needed was a drink. He pushed open the batwings and threaded through the tables toward the platform.

Belle hadn't come on yet. Hawles found an empty seat, got himself a bottle and a glass, and settled down. Tilting back his head, he took the first glassful in one swallow. It felt warm and comfortable inside him. He poured more.

But the drink didn't take away his bitterness. It increased it, if anything, so that by the time the piano began playing his anger had crowded everything else out. He watched, with half-closed eyes, while Belle did her dance, following her every movement with a studied intense concentration.

He poured more liquor into the glass, listening to it gurgle as it came from the bottle. It occurred to him that Belle was the apex of a triangle, with Bart on one hand and Josie on the other. He could hurt them both through Belle—Bart because she was his woman now, and Josie because she loved him. Hawles set the glass down hard, so that some of the liquor spattered on the table.

He let Belle finish and leave the platform before he got up and followed her. She went up the stairs, heading to the room where she dressed. As he went up, he heard the piano starting to play again. A sudden wild rush of madness flooded through him. She had just shut her door when he kicked it open.

"Kirb!"

She stood in the center of the room, her features frozen in tight harsh lines.

"Howdy, Belle. It's been a long time."

"Kirb, you'd better go."

He laughed. "We're safe. Bart's got other things on his mind right now."

Her hand went to her throat. Her eyes were wide and glassy under her long curled lashes. "But Kirb—"

"You ran out on me, remember," he went on, his voice growing harsh, "so you could have Bart. I haven't forgotten."

She said desperately, "You know you didn't care. You'd met someone else."

"Now I've come back."

He went over to her, caught her up savagely in his arms, and held her that way a moment, feeling her hot breath on his cheek and hearing the pounding of her heart against his chest. When he bent over he saw her lips, too red, smeared a little at the corners. She was trying to claw her way free. Her nails scratched at his cheek.

Abruptly, his brain cleared. He let her go. He knew he didn't want this. It was a crazy, useless gesture. She broke away, her whole body seeming to collapse.

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"Reckon I made a mistake," Hawles said slowly. "Like you said, it was all over."

She seemed to be looking at something a long way off. "I'm afraid, Kirb—not of you any more, but of what may happen."

"You'll be all right. Better off maybe, without Bart."

He heard, distantly, the rising crescendo of men's voices. It meant nothing to him. He thought, there isn't any way out for me. The law has taken care of Bart. I'm cut off from Josie by a wall of misunderstandings. He had no belief in himself any more.

Belle was talking again when he left her. Going down the stairs, he heard the clamor swell up around him. He noted vaguely that fully half the patrons of the Green Front had left. But it wasn't important to him then.

AT THE bar, he ordered another drink. It was only when the barman brought him the bottle that he remarked without curiosity, "Something up, Freddie?"

"Bart and Red broke jail. They hit Kop Singer with a piece of pipe and knocked him cold. The sheriff's rounding up a posse."

Hawles helped himself to a drink, thinking that now he could go after Bart. But he shoved the thought down. The law had stepped in on his business. Let the law handle it. He took a drink, letting the whisky linger on his tongue before he swallowed.

A driving rain, lashed by winds from the hills, stung Hawles's face as he rode out to his ranch in the early morning. The drinks had worn off, leaving him with a feeling of defeat that was a gnawing pain in his guts. He bent low in the saddle, the reins slippery in his hands, his sodden clothes cold against his flesh.

He passed a group of riders just off the trail, part of Rainey's posse searching for sign that would direct them to Bart Temple. They wouldn't make out much in this storm, Hawles thought. The torrent would wash away any traces Bart and Red Galt might have left. It didn't matter to him. Nothing mattered. He acknowledged their greeting sullenly and rode on into the wind.

When his ranch house appeared between the stand of cottonwoods, he glanced at it through slitted eyes, noting for the first time the poverty of it. It wasn't much to come back to, to work for. He had given this spread months of toil and sweat, and it hardly served to provide him a grudging living. It would have been better to sell it when there was a chance.

A curl of smoke from the chimney was caught and snatched away by the wind. His mother would be feeding the cookstove, cooking something for him to have on his return.

His mount's hoofs sloshed across the grass to the corral. Hawles swung to the ground, loosened the cinch, unsaddled, and carried the harness to the shed. He stood there for a moment, smelling the rain and the emptiness of the range, while he wiped the back of his hand across his dripping chin.

This was the beginning and the end, this ranch, he thought. His mother could go into town and live with his aunt. He'd sell out and push on, north to the mines, perhaps, or west to the coast, or maybe across the border—Anywhere that would let him leave his memories behind.

The wind whipped the ranch house door open as he lifted the latch. He could feel the dry warmth as he stepped inside. He pushed the door closed, hearing the rain beating against the roof. He wanted dry clothes and his bunk to sleep on for a while, so he wouldn't have to remember.

He moved across the floor, leaving a trail of wet behind him, going toward the back room where he'd find his mother at the cookstove. But he knew, as he stepped inside, that something was wrong. Then Bart Temple edged in toward him from his position against the wall. Red Galt came in from the other side. Bart's gun punched Hawles in the ribs.

Hawles said, "The old lady—"

"She's not harmed. She's in her room."

The tension went out of Hawles. He said, "Take that shooter away, Bart. It's not polite to poke a feller that way."

Red Galt was going over him, feeling for a weapon. "He's not armed, Bart," Red announced.

Bart let his gun arm fall to his side. He said, "Hawles, it wouldn't be smart to try to pull anything."

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"I'm smart that way."

He walked over to the stove. There was a pot of coffee on it. He poured some into a mug, took it over to the table, and added milk from the can and a spoonful of sugar.

After he had drunk it he said, "There's a posse down the trail. They might be coming up here."

Bart had pulled a chair over to the table. His eyes were on Hawles. Red was helping himself to coffee.

"We can handle them here," Bart said. "I don't cotton to pulling out in this storm. From this house we have a clear view on all sides."

"A good posse could blast you out."

"You and your mother, too. It would be better if they didn't find us here. That's up to you."

Hawles stirred his empty cup. He said slowly, "I have no liking for the law. If anyone gets you, I want it to be me."

"And you haven't much chance of that, Hawles."

"I figured that, too."

The storm kept on. Rain lashed at the windows, drummed against the roofs, while the wind bent the tops of the cottonwoods to the ground. Bart set Red Galt to checking the range, to watch for a posse. He let Hawles's mother come out to do the cooking.

Bart's hand was never very far from his holster. His eye never strayed more than momentarily from Hawles. And Kirb Hawles waited, silently drinking coffee, and knowing that something important in him had died. He didn't care any more, about Bart Temple, the beating Red Galt had given him, or even much about Josie.

The posse came during a lull in the storm. Hawles met them at the door, conscious of the sixgun Bart Temple trained at his back from around the door jamb.

Sheriff Rainey said wearily, "Just checking, Kirb. We thought maybe Bart Temple came along by here."

"I haven't seen him," Hawles said.

Fatigue was evident in the sheriff's slack shoulders. The skin under his stubbled beard was turning blue. "I know you have a grudge against him. You wouldn't be likely to cover up for him."

"Not likely, Rainey."

The sheriff turned away reluctantly. Hawles pushed the door closed. He swung around, and stood for a moment staring at the floor. He should have asked Rainey in, and offered the men something warm to drink. They'd think it odd he didn't. But he couldn't help that.

OUTSIDE, he could hear the creak of wet leather and the slosh of hoofs. He thought, Bart and Red Galt will get away now. They'll be free to go where they like and make a fool of someone else, the way they had of him. They could beat up anyone they had a mind to, even kill, if they wanted to. He had failed, and the law had failed.

Slowly he walked toward the back room, the resentment building up inside him. He realized that his fists were clenched tightly at his side. There was a throbbing at his temples, like the beat of a drum. What Josie had said made sense now. If he'd thrown in with Rainey, with the law, this might not have happened. He wouldn't be beaten down with the sense of his own failure, and Bart Temple might not be free.

Bart was sitting in the chair again, his gun on the table before him, his eye cool and sure. Red Galt, his small head cocked to one side, was looking idly out of the window. The rain had begun again.

"You did all right," Bart said, grinning. "Like you meant what you said."

"I'm smart," Hawles answered. He moved over to the table.

He thought, I'm getting things wrong. Bart and Red had clubbed Kop Singer; that was why they were here, not because of what he himself had or hadn't done. You can't tell if anything will be different; you only do what seems right at the time, and everything follows from that.

But he knew, now, in a sudden flash of clarity, that it hadn't been right. It had been his own selfish desire to pay back Bart himself that had caused this mess.

He acted then, almost without conscious thought. He whipped forward, going for the gun on the table. Bart Temple saw what he intended. He gave a little cry and sprang up, clawing for his weapon. Hawles brought

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his knee up under the table and tipped it toward Bart. The gun slid off to the floor.

An explosion rocked the room. Then Hawles dived at Bart, not caring whether Red Galt was firing. Their bodies met with a crash, and fell together heavily. Another shot tore splinters out of the table, while Hawles and Bart rolled across the floor.

He drove a free fist into Bart Temple's mouth, and felt a rib crack as strong arms closed around his chest. He struggled to break free, and found himself on his back with Bart's heavy weight pinning him down helplessly. He arched his back, twisted, and Bart went over. He could look down into the hate-filled eyes, feel the hot breath against his cheek. With aching fingers, he reached down for Bart's throat.

Then, as Bart brought up his knee, jamming it savagely to his groin, pain exploded all over Hawles. He sank his teeth into his lower lip and tried to hold on to his strength. It seemed that there was a staccato of gunfire all around him. He tried to pull in his breath. As he went over, his head slammed against the floor.

He heard, above the other sounds, Bart Temple cursing him, and he saw the redness of the blood dribbling in a thin trickle down the man's chin. And then Bart had a gun and was thumbing back the hammer. The blunt, hollow muzzle was staring straight at Kirb.

He wondered what it would be like to die, how it would feel when the slug opened a hole in his face. What would happen to his mother, to Josie, to the spread?

His muscles tore under the strain as he lifted his shoulders and struggled to free his right arm. Bart triggered, but Hawles's struggling had thrown Bart off balance, so that lead only tore the flesh of Hawles's shoulder.

But he had his arm free now, and he brought the side of his hand against Bart's wrist with a sharp chop. The gun slipped from fingers that were momentarily paralyzed. Hawles pawed for it and found it, feeling the metal hot and smooth in his wet palm.

He fired just as Bart Temple's fist bashed into his face, sending sparks dancing before his eyes. The slug went through Bart Temple's throat, but Hawles didn't know that until later. He did not know, either, that Rainey and the posse, suspicious of Hawles's lack of hospitality, had not ridden away but had remained to check the shed and outbuildings. So at the sound of the first shot Red Galt fired, the posse had closed in on the ranch house.

"If you hadn't gotten Galt," Kirb Hawles told Rainey later, "I reckon I wouldn't be here."

The sheriff ran a hand moodily over his chin. "It just goes to show that a feller can't always make out alone."

Hawles grinned at him. Then he looked out across the range. In the distance, the sinking sun was painting the low clouds with streaks of crimson and gold. It's not a bad spread, he thought. I'll work mighty hard, and raise a lot of sweat, but the cows will bring a good price, come fall—enough, maybe, to add another room to the ranch house.

"You'll stay to eat?" Hawles asked.

"Sure will. I sort of miss my gal's cooking."

They walked together up to the house. Josie came to meet them at the door. Her black hair glistened in the dying sunlight. Hawles felt strangely humble, seeing the way her eyes smiled at him.

"This law man says we have to feed him," Hawles said, winking at Josie. "Isn't the law ever going to stop meddling in my affairs?"

Josie tried to keep from laughing. "If you'd keep out of trouble, maybe the law would stop its meddling," she told him.

"I figured getting myself hitched to the sheriff's daughter wasn't going to do me any good. But I reckon I'll make out. Anyway, it's worth trying."

He lifted his hand, tilted Josie's chin, and brushed her lips with his. He thought, Josie and I will sure make out fine.

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MAYBE most little boys in this modern, jet-propelled age dream of being space pilots, but it's nice to know there's at least one youngster with the fine old-fashioned dream of being a cowboy. There's at least one adult with the same dream, which came true, but we'll get to him later.

The boy is 13-year-old Richard Baker of Mattapan, Mass., who turned up missing after his family had taken him to the Boston Garden Rodeo. His mother knows him pretty well, so she didn't call the police, she called the Boston Garden. The rodeo producers looked in the backs of their trucks, which were just on the point of heading West. Inside, sure enough, was Richard, already half-frozen and drenched, but determined that his next stop would be the Cow Palace in San Francisco.

A more practical dreamer, though not by much, is Richmond P. Hobson, Jr., who hasn't been a boy since the '20's. He grew up in Washington, D. C., and his parents thought it was only a boy's vivid imagination that made him talk of being a cowboy some day.

But he meant it, sure enough. It was after only a couple of years in a job on New York's Wall Street that he headed West. It was the depths of the depression, but Rich figured that getting hired as a cowboy wouldn't be any harder than getting hired at anything else. He did go to work on a Wyoming ranch, learned his trade for two years, and then struck out on his own.

This time he headed North. He was a tenderfoot full of pioneer spirit, so he settled further North than anyone else who wanted to raise cattle ever had before. The nearest town is 200 miles away from Rich Robson's ranch, where the freeze-up comes in November and the break-up not till May.

He and his partners astonished everyone who said cattle couldn't survive those winters, when the temperature sometimes goes down to 70 below. Both the cattle and the cowboys have survived, and Rich has written two books to prove it. Four years ago he came out with *Grass Beyond the Mountains,* and just recently *Nothing Too Good for a Cowboy* has been published by Lippincott.

Cowboys who are practically Eskimos have lots of unusual problems. There are huge Northern wolves, which hamstring cattle and eat them alive for days before the poor critters die. There are snow-covered ranges where cattle can't forage and where cowboys have to deliver their feed, come any kind of weather.

Women, naturally, are as scarce in those remote parts as they were in the wildest and wooliest days of the Old West. Rich was mighty lonely, and he dreamed of a blond angel with up-tilted eyes. Then one day he saw a picture of her standing beside a prize Jersey bull. He had no doubts that she was the one for him, and he was right. Within a week he'd traveled 600 miles to find her, persuaded her to marry him, and come back those 600 miles with his bride—thus proving he's the match of any old-time cowboy in romantic spirit as well as adventurousness.

Rich recalls that his most exciting moments came when he tried to drive a herd of wild horses through the city of Vancouver in the middle of the night. His grimmest times were on a frozen trail drive, when he and a few cowboys herded 300 head across two rivers to a feeding ground 100 miles away from where they started.

Rich Hobson is living proof that the spirit of the Old West isn't dead, though you may have to look pretty far North to find it.

Adios,

THE EDITORS

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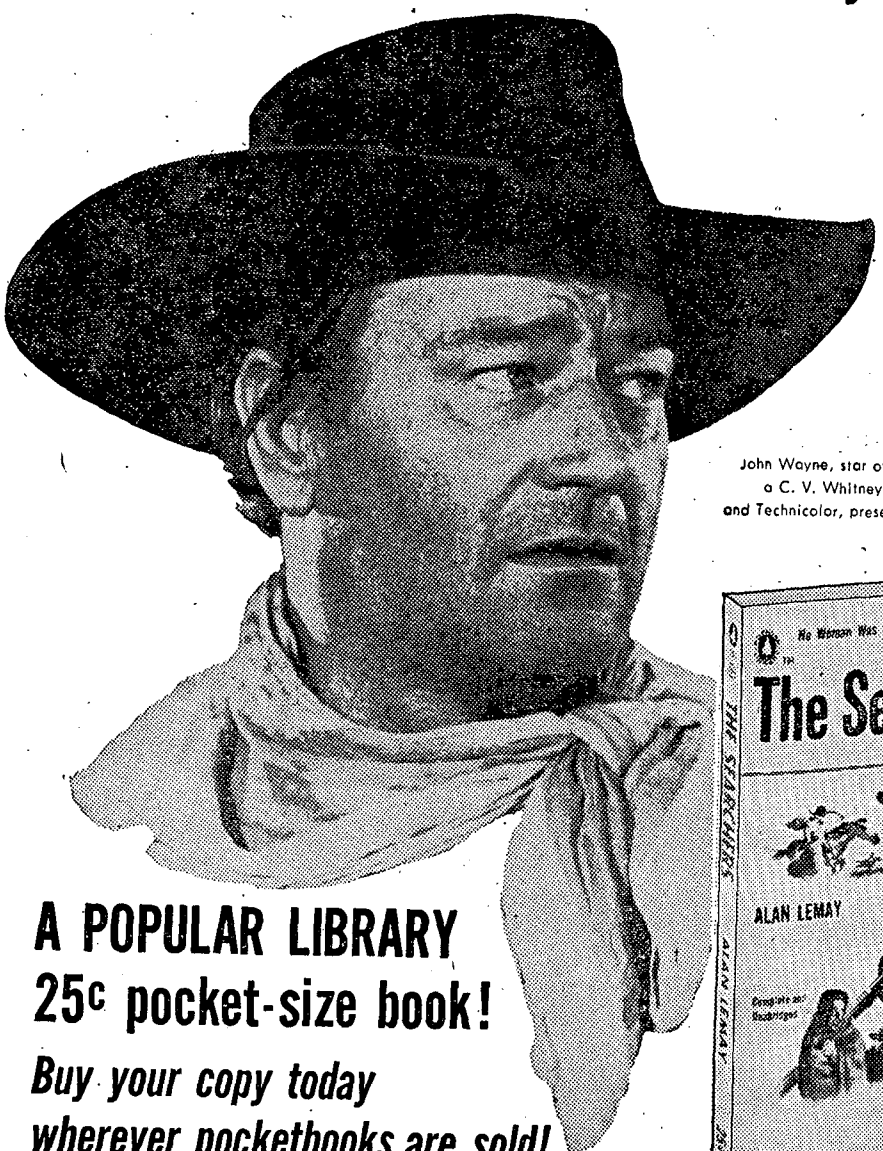
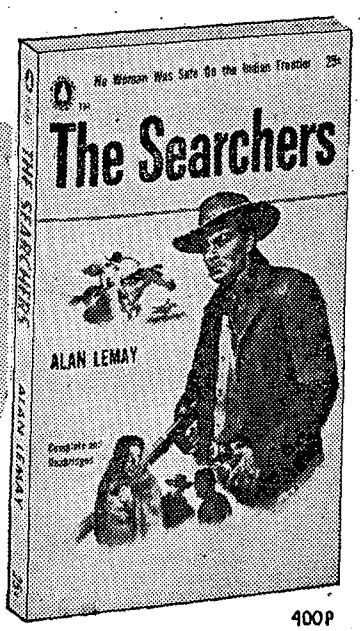
Everybody's reading

The Searchers

A POPULAR LIBRARY bestseller soon to be a great motion picture starring John Wayne



John Wayne, star of "THE SEARCHERS," a C. V. Whitney Picture in VistaVision and Technicolor, presented by Warner Bros.



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Scott dropped flat on the ground, dragging his gun from leather.

TROUBLE RANGE

By Gordon C. Baldwin

THE STORY SO FAR: Deputy Sheriff SCOTT MORGAN is sent to Mesa to meet JANE, daughter of Sheriff TOM WARNER, on her arrival from the East. While waitng, Scott notices a suspicious-looking stranger in a checked shirt. Scott is told that the stage coach on which he and Jane will be returning to Sentinel will be carrying $20,000. Suspecting a holdup attempt, he is able to foil it when it comes—with the help of another passenger, NAN AUSTIN. During the holdup he again sees the man in the checked shirt. Later Scott learns that Warner and JUDGE HORACE SPELLMAN have been murdered. In Sentinel, Scott again sees the stranger, learns his name is BUCK CLAYTON, and traps GENE DECKER, owner of the Elkhorn Saloon and the Rocking R ranch, into admitting an alliance with him. With the help of another deputy, JIM CANNON, Scott figures out that Warner and the judge were murdered because they knew too much about Decker. But he knows he must have proof of his theory.

PART TWO

AT TEN o'clock Scott Morgan and Jim Cannon left the hotel and paused at the edge of the porch steps. Lights were still on in half a dozen buildings. Up at the head of the street Scott's eye caught the glow of a lamp in Dr. Doolittle's house,

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reminding him that he should attend to his bullet burn. Might as well do it now, he thought. But Jim had other ideas.

"We need a drink, Scott," he said. "Come on, I'll buy you one." He started toward Mike Trout's Frontier, their favorite saloon.

"All right, Jim. But let's have it at the Elkhorn."

"What you want to go there for?" The faint light from the hotel lobby reflected the astonishment on Jim's face. "You looking for trouble?"

Scott grinned and shook his head. "No, but we need evidence, and we won't get it by sitting back. It's time we put the pressure on them."

Jim looked long at him, and finally shrugged. "Reckon you're right, but watch your step. That's a hardcase outfit. They'll stop at nothing."

"Neither will we. Come on, I thought you said you were thirsty."

Despite the late hour, the saloon was fairly well filled. Scott hesitated momentarily, catching the identity of the crowd at one quick survey. At the far end of the long bar, beyond a couple of townsmen, stood Lew Hackett, and beside him Scott sighted Buck Clayton's checked shirt. Midway the length of the mahogany, Hub Ackerman pivoted his wiry length and grinned at them. There was a poker game going on at a corner table, with the drummer, Pierce, and four ranchers sitting in. George Conway, one of the poker players and the owner of the Nine Bar Seven, nodded to the newcomers.

Scott and Jim joined the new deputy, Hub Ackerman, and ordered drinks from a squat, balding bartender. After a round or two, Hub left to get ready for his trip to Mesa. Scott leaned forward, idly making rings on the mahogany with the wet bottom of his whisky glass. Jim, standing beside him, his eyes on the back bar mirror, suddenly spoke softly out of the side of his mouth.

"Look, Scott!"

Scott slanted his glance to the mirror and saw Buck Clayton push away from the bar and come swaggering up the room. Scott knew instantly where he was heading. He swung around and stood with his back to the bar, his elbows resting loosely on the top of it. The movement seemed to upset Clayton. He hesitated, lurched to a stop six feet from Scott, and Scott now saw that he was drunk and in a murderous rage.

"Looking for somebody, Morgan?" Clayton said thickly.

The clink of glasses and the murmur of voices abruptly ceased. For a moment there wasn't a sound. Then a faint shuffling of boots came, as men caught in the possible line of fire hastily shifted position. Scott eyed Clayton, letting the silence drag.

"That's something that doesn't concern you." Scott's voice was deceptively soft. Beyond the lanky man was a blur of motion, and Gene Decker appeared in his office doorway. Scott thought he detected a pleased look on the blond man's face.

Clayton's face darkened and he spat out an oath. "I'm making it my business. I don't like the way you talked about me this afternoon, Morgan."

"You don't say," drawled Scott, taking a short step out from the bar, hands dropping to his sides. "What's the matter? Does the truth hurt?"

It took several seconds for the import of Scott's words to penetrate Clayton's whisky-dulled brain. Then he gaped at Scott, sucking his breath in sharply. His face went dark red and then dead white.

"Damn you, Morgan," he said, "you can't call me a liar and get away with it." His right hand streaked for his gun.

But Scott had glimpsed the telltale flicker of Clayton's eyes, and his left hand shot out and pinned the lanky man's hand against the butt of his gun. With the same smooth movement Scott's right fist came up and crashed squarely on Clayton's jaw. Clayton's head snapped back, his eyes dulled, and he went over backward, stretching his full length on the floor.

Scott's hard glance lifted to Gene Decker, and the saloonman met the look without any change of expression. Then the room came alive. George Conway slapped a horny palm flat on the card table and swore lustily.

"By heaven, Scott, I never saw a sweeter punch. Damned if it's not worth a drink. Set 'em up, Whitey." The ranchman waved a hand at the wide-eyed bartender.

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They pushed up to the bar, Walt Berry, Conway's foreman, and the drummer, Pierce, echoing the rancher's words. Only Lew Hackett and Gene Decker made no comment.

The man on the floor stirred weakly, and Scott stooped down, saying, "Be right with you, George." He removed the gun from Clayton's lax fingers, jacked out the cartridges, placed gun and shells on the mahogany. He looked down the room at Gene Decker. "You'd better hold these, Gene, till Clayton sobers up. He might get hurt playing with guns."

There was a half smile on his lean face. He saw the anger blaze up in the stocky man's eyes, saw it checked as Decker held it in control.

Scott had his glass raised when a harsh, thickened voice behind him croaked, "Turn around, Morgan. I'm going to beat hell out of you."

SCOTT emptied his glass, set it down on the bar, then swung leisurely to face Buck Clayton, who was weaving on unsteady legs, his eyes still partially glazed. Scott looked the hatchet-faced man up and down and said, "I'm giving you a break, Clayton. I could run you in, but I'm letting you go this time. My advice to you is to get out of town and stay out."

"You can't scare me. Give me a gun or I'll fight you barehanded."

Impatiently Scott reached out, grasped the checked shirt front, and lifted the rangy man up until Clayton was standing on tiptoe. "Get this, Clayton, and get it fast. I meant what I said. Either get out, or I'll sling you in the jug. Now, what's it going to be?"

Clayton said, "You'll regret this, Morgan, to the last day of your life. I'm going, but I'll be back—and don't you forget it."

With a jerk, Scott whirled the man about and shoved him roughly toward the door. "Get out, then. Sentinel can get along without your kind."

Not until the batwings had ceased swaying behind Clayton did Scott turn back to the bar. "Thanks for the drink, George," he said. He lifted a hand to Jim. "I'm heading for Doc's. See you at the office later."

Outside the Elkhorn, Scott paused beside the door and gave the street a careful survey. But there was no sign of Clayton and, knowing him to be unarmed now, Scott dismissed the man from his mind and turned up the boardwalk. Across the street he saw the small, darkened restaurant into which Nan Austin would be moving tomorrow.

Something about the girl had attracted him, and thoughts of her remained with him as he swung past a saddle store, a blacksmith shop, and the high board wall surrounding a lumber yard. Beyond was a weed-choked vacant lot, and beyond this was Dr. Doolittle's house.

Scott went through a gate in the picket fence enclosing the yard, climbed the steps to the porch, and knocked on the door. A gruff voice called out, "Come in."

Scott stepped inside, and said hello to the man seated beside a table in the center of the room. Doolittle was a chuby little man with a dark spade beard and equally dark, piercing eyes.

"What's the trouble, Scott?"

"Got a little scratch along my ribs, Doc."

Doolittle put a mark in the book he had been reading. "Pull off your shirt and let's have a look at it." As he cleaned the wound, he said, "I heard about the stage holdup. You were lucky to get off this easy. You were luckier than old Tom and the judge—two of the best friends I ever had. I hope you get that bunch of murderers, Scott."

"I'll do my best, Doc."

"There, that ought to do. Better take it easy for a few days."

"That's probably good advice, but I doubt if I can follow it." Scott slid into his shirt and buttoned it up. "Thanks, Doc."

Scott had just closed the gate when something caused him to pull up short in the shadows at the edge of the picket fence bordering the vacant lot. The street lay dark and empty before him, its gloom relieved only by the faint light from the windows of three or four buildings. Yet the feeling was strong in him that someone was watching him, waiting for him. There was no sound, no movement. He could hear the breeze rustle the dry leaves, but nothing else. And then, even as he listened, from off to the left there came the faint whisper of cloth scraping wood.

At the sound, Scott dropped flat on the

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ground, dragging his gun from leather as he went down. But he was too late. An orange streak of light stabbed out at him from the far edge of the vacant lot, and Scott felt the hot burn of lead along his right side. That could only be Buck Clayton, he thought bitterly.

He hugged the ground beside the fence, gun extended, not sure of his ambusher's exact location. Again the hidden gun exploded, and lead screamed close above him. That shot had come from midway along the base of the lumber yard's high board wall, and Scott snapped a fast pair of shots, then rolled hurriedly to the side. He heard his lead thud solidly into wood, and knew he had missed.

Again the man fired, aiming at Scott's gun flashes, and now a second gun opened up from deeper in the vacant lot. Bullets were searching the yard, crashing with jarring impact into the boardwalk, kicking up dust all around him. They had him cornered. He couldn't last much longer. Even now there was a warm wetness where that first bullet had grazed him. Something had to be done, and done quickly, if he were to get out of this alive.

Centering his aim above and slightly behind the muzzle flash of the nearer gun, he let drive two quick shots, then heard the meaty impact of one of the bullets striking flesh. There came a scream of agony, abruptly choked off. A moment later Scott heard the dull thud of a body pitching to the ground.

At the sound, the second drygulcher broke under the pressure and fled, his boots clumping in the dust. Scott sighted a vague blur, triggered off a shot, and then let the hammer fall a second time. But it dropped on a fired shell. Then the figure faded in the dense blackness of the alley, and the sound of his running feet was lost in the growing thunder as men poured out of the saloons and headed for the scene of the shooting.

Lanterns pierced the shadows and excited voices called back and forth. Scott came to his feet, shucked the empties from his gun, and slipped in fresh cartridges. Behind him Doolittle's door creaked.

The doctor's gruff voice called, "That you, Scott? You all right?"

"Reckon so, Doc, but it looks like I've got a customer for you."

Sprawled against the base of the lumber yard's wall, he could make out a huddled shape. He had started to walk forward when Jim Cannon's loud hail came, from the vanguard of the rapidly approaching crowd.

"Scott! Where are you? Sing out, Scott!"

Scott lifted his voice. "I'm all right, Jim. Bring a light over here."

HE WAS staring down at the motionless figure when Jim tramped quickly up beside him, breathing hard. "What happened, Scott?"

His voice cut off as a lantern threw its yellow beam across the limp body lying face down at Scott's feet. The light reflected off the blood already pooling the dust.

"Who is it?" Jim asked, stooping to turn the body over.

"Buck Clayton." Scott had no need to see the man's face. One look at the black-and-white checked shirt and yellow neckerchief was enough.

Clayton was dead. Both of Scott's bullets had caught him chest high. His left arm was outstretched above his head, his right arm at his side, the gun still tightly clenched in his hand. The fingers of his extended hand were clenched as if in agony. Buck Clayton had died as he had lived, violently.

"It's Clayton, all right," said Jim. "And mighty dead."

"He said he'd be back," observed George Conway dryly, "but I don't reckon he expected such a warm welcome."

Scott ran his gaze around the ring of faces, and almost immediately met Gene Decker's inscrutable glance. Scott's face set. He said bluntly, "Didn't take you long to give Clayton back his gun, did it, Gene?"

The saloonman's eyebrows went up. "You're wrong, Morgan," he said coolly. "I haven't seen Clayton since you threw him out. His gun is right where you left it." There was just a thread of amusement in his voice.

Briefly, Scott was shaken. He had a feeling that the blond man was telling the truth, since his statement could be checked. Suddenly Scott remembered something, and his glance went swiftly around the circle, then came back to the bland saloon owner.

"Where's Lew Hackett, Gene?"

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The question surprised Decker, and he stiffened. "Why? Lew had nothing to do with this." He gestured toward the body on the ground.

"Are you sure about that?" countered Scott. "There were two of them laying for me. The other one was lucky and got away." His words brought muttered exclamations from the crowd. "Clayton was new in town. He had to have at least one friend, the one who got hold of another gun for him. Who else did he know besides Hackett? Doesn't that put a different light on it?" A murmur of assent came from three or four of the onlookers.

The lantern's yellow glow flickered across Decker's face. He didn't say anything for a moment, but Scott saw the pulse begin to beat in his temple. "You're wrong about Lew," he finally said. "He left for the ranch right after you went out, so he couldn't have been here. As for his knowing Clayton, that's easily explained. Lew brought him in to see me, saying he'd known Clayton slightly down in Arizona, five or six years ago, and that Clayton was hunting a job. However, I had nothing for him. That's all there was to it. For all I know, Clayton may have had a dozen friends in town."

Decker had regained his assurance, and his smile was once more smooth. He looked arrogantly around, as if daring anyone to take issue with him. It needed only one glance at the nodding heads for Scott to realize that Decker's eloquence had convinced most of the bystanders that both Decker and Hackett were merely innocent victims of Clayton's. He would need solid evidence before he could openly acuse Decker of anything crooked. It was mid-morning when Scott Morgan and Jim Cannon rode across the plank bridge over Wind River and headed eastward. The day was bright and clear, the slow-climbing slope ahead gleamed in the sunshine, yet Scott's mind was still concerned with the scene just concluded in the county commissioner's office.

The three commissioners, George Conway, the chairman, Gus Jackson, the elderly owner of Sentinel's largest store, and the poker-faced Gene Decker, were sitting around a table when Scott was called in.

"Grab a chair, Scott," Conway said, squinting up at the tall deputy. "Most of what we have to say won't be news to you. We've decided to appoint you sheriff for the balance of Tom's term. Will you take the job?"

At Scott's nod, Conway smiled and went on, "Good. You're just the man for the job. That means we've got a vacancy." He lifted a hand, as Scott's mouth opened. "Yeah, I know you've got full authority to make your own appointments, but under the present circumstances it's important we pick a good man. Somebody's that's a gunfighter, to help put a stop to these killings and stage holdups. There aren't many like that around, but Decker thinks he has one that'll fill the bill. Tell him about it, Gene."

Scott looked at Decker, raising his eyebrows inquiringly. The saloonman removed the cigar from his mouth and studied its glowing tip for a moment.

"There's some rustling going on in the basin, as you all know," he said. "What you may not know is that I've lost rather heavily in the last few months. Tom didn't seem to be getting anywhere, and I finally decided to send for a man I thought could put an end to it—Dutch Dorman. Dutch is a gunman, but an honest one. He's had a lot of experience up in Wyoming, and he'd make a good deputy. He should be here today. I'll even offer to pay half his salary until this business is cleared up."

He stopped, and all three of them watched Scott. There was a long silence while Scott stared at Decker, a frosty glint in his blue eyes. "Dutch Dorman?" he finally said. "He wouldn't happen to be a big man with black eyes, would he?"

GENE DECKER'S chalky eyes widened, and it was three or four seconds before he nodded shortly. "That sounds like Dutch. Why?"

"Then I don't reckon Dutch wants the job now, and I damn well know I don't want him as a deputy." Scott looked at the others, saw the shocked expressions on their faces. Tersely he told them of his encounter with Dutch in Mesa. He concluded, "And that puts Dutch in bad company, to say the least, and maybe ties him in with the attempt on the stage. It seems your friend has turned outlaw since you last saw him, Gene."

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He looked directly at Decker as he said this, but the blond man's smooth face showed nothing. There was only a faint edge of anger in his tone as he answered, "I think you've got him wrong, Morgan. Dutch always did like a fight. He probably just wanted to have a little fun. I still think he'd make a good deputy, and my offer still holds."

"It's too late," Scott said easily. "I've already appointed one."

Decker's face went slack, and Conway said quickly, "Who've you appointed?"

"Hub Ackerman. He'll be at Mesa, and Ned Quinn'll be chief deputy."

There was a definite twinkle in George Conway's shrewd blue eyes as he nodded at Scott. "Hub's a good man, and so's Ned." He turned to the other commissioners. "After what happened yesterday and last night, I think we've got a good gunfighter right here. I don't reckon we need to drag in any outsiders. We can kill our own snakes. You've got my backing, Scott."

Gus Jackson voiced his agreement and, after a long pause, Decker nodded curtly. The meeting had ended with that, and Scott had left to join the waiting Jim Cannon. Yet he still remembered his last glimpse of Gene Decker. The expression on the saloonman's face had been distinctly unpleasant.

Scott began to realize he had underestimated Gene Decker badly. The man was cuning, dangerous. He had lied about his heavy cattle losses, for Tom Warner had never mentioned them. That had been something thought up by Decker to account for his bringing in Dutch Dorman.

It had been a shrewd move, and might have worked if Scott hadn't had that chance meeting in Mesa. Scott was sure of one thing: Decker would not rest until he had paid Scott back for his activities of the past twenty-four hours.

Half an hour out of Sentinel, the two riders followed faint wheel tracks into a pine thicket just off the Rafter M road. In the small central clearing the grass was trampled down, and all around were wagon tracks and horse tracks. Scott pulled his rangy bay in, and crooked a leg over his saddle horn. He fashioned a cigarette, then silently passed sack and papers across to Jim. After a moment Jim squinted at Scott through the tobacco smoke.

"Couldn't find a thing here yesterday," he said, half apologetically.

"I don't doubt it, Jim," Scott was quick to reassure him. "It seems as if the whole county's been here. Well, let's have a look around."

He swung down and began working slowly back and forth, studying the ground. He searched the area long and thoroughly before finally coming to a halt in the center of the clearing. Jim came up beside him, an inquiring look in his homely face.

"You were right, Jim; there's not much here. But I'm sure of one thing."

"What's that?"

"They weren't shot here. They were brought in after they were dead."

Jim showed surprise. "How do you figure that?"

"No blood for one thing," Scott told him. "With two bullet holes in each of them, they must've bled like stuck pigs, and some would've spilled on the ground beneath the buggy. But there's none here at all."

"That's right. There was dried blood all over the floor of the buggy."

"Also, if the judge's horse had been here long, there would be a lot more sign. They must've been killed early in the day, hidden until dark, and then brought here." Scott frowned. "If we're right about their having been headed for Decker's, then that could be anywhere between here and there. It would be like looking for a needle in a haystack, and still wouldn't prove anything."

He turned to his horse, stepped up into saddle, and looked across at Jim. "Why couldn't Tom and the judge have waited and seen Decker in town? What was their rush?" Scott shook his head. "We've a job ahead of us, Jim, a hell of a job."

Jim scratched his head. "Damned if I can understand it, Scott," he said. "But you'd better watch yourself. They missed you last night only because you shot straighter than Clayton. But they'll try again."

"I'll keep my eyes open." Scott lifted his reins. "Let's go. It's time to ride if we're going to make the Rafter M for the funeral."

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For Tom Warner was being buried that afternoon beside his long-dead wife in the small graveyard in back of the Rafter M ranchhouse.

Three hours later Scott stood with Jane Warner on the broad front gallery of the Rafter M ranchhouse, saying good-by to those who were leaving. Almost everybody in Rainbow Basin had attended Tom Warner's funeral, paying a final tribute to a strong and colorful personality.

A tall man in his late twenties, with a lazy, smiling face and exceedingly dark blue eyes, laid a hand on Scott's arm. "Take it easy, kid," he said. "This's been a big blow to you, but you'll get over it. If you ever need any help, let me know."

"Thanks, Bob." Scott looked at his brother with deep affection.

Bob Morgan nodded. "I don't mind your borrowing Hub for a while," he said, "but remember, I want him back in the fall." He slapped Scott on the back and was gone.

BY ONES and twos, group by group, the rigs and wagons and saddle horses pulled away on the long ride home. Presently there were left only the half-dozen Rafter M riders and Jim and Scott. The latter led Jane into the living room and turned her over to a buxom, pleasant-faced woman. Hattie Bedford had been Tom Warner's housekeeper for the past ten years, and now she was continuing in the same capacity for his daughter.

Jane swung to face Scott. Her calm voice had only a slight tremor in it. "Don't go, Scott. Stay for supper."

"I'm sorry, Jane. There's nothing I'd like better, but I've got work to do. You understand how it is?"

"I know, Scott. It's selfish of me, but I did want you to stay." She brushed a lock of hair back from her forehead and looked up at him, her lips softening. "You're just like Dad. The office always came first with him."

"Thanks for the compliment. I hope I am like old Tom." He started to turn away, but the girl laid a hand on his arm, giving him a searching look.

"I heard about the trouble in town. Take care of yourself, Scott: I wouldn't want the same thing to happen to you." Her fingers tightened.

"Don't worry, Jane," he told her. "You can't get rid of me that easy. I'll be back before you know it to take you up on that supper invitation." He said good-by to the two women and stepped into the yard.

The sound of faint, good-natured swearing drifted up from the log bunkhouse. At the corral, Jim Cannon leaned against the gate beside two saddled horses, idly talking to Ray Chase, the Rafter M foreman. They broke off as Scott tramped up. Chase, a big, crazy-featured man, pushed a battered Stetson back from his forehead.

"Much obliged for the help, Scott," he said gruffly. "It's hard to believe old Tom is gone." He reached down, picked a dried grass stem, and chewed on it thoughtfully. "Who do you reckon it was? You got anything to go on?"

"Nothing much yet, Ray, but I think we're on the right track."

The Rafter M foreman gave Scott a careful appraisal and finally nodded his head. "I reckon you know what you're doing. But any time you need me and the boys, just send the word and we'll come."

"Thanks, Ray. I know I can count on you." Scott cocked his head at the sober-faced Jim. "I'm on my way to Twin Springs. You take care of things in town. Look around the office again. I'd like to know what they were hunting for." He untied the reins of his horse and eased into the saddle.

"Sure you don't need me?" Jim queried hopefuly.

"You think I need help to handle Oscar?" Scott grinned. "I'll see you in town late tonight or tomorrow."

He lifted his hand, reined sharply about, and rode out of the yard to the east, toward the lower end of the Turkey Tracks.

Scott held the bay at a running walk, yet it was late afternoon before he topped a high bluff and looked down on Twin Springs basin. From the protection of the cedars his eye swept the low log house and the sprawling corrals. Smoke curled lazily up from the projecting stovepipe at the back of the house. Other than this, and four horses in one of the pole corrals, there was no sign of life.

Finaly satisfied that Trumbaugh and his as-

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sistant were alone, Scott started to pull back, when a man emerged from the house and headed for the corral. At this distance the sheriff had no trouble recognizing the husky shape of Al Sanderson, Trumbaugh's hostler, and he watched while the man roped out a horse, saddled, and rode off to the southwest, in the direction of Rocking R.

Not until horse and rider had disappeared in the trees did Scott pick up the reins again. He was in luck, he thought, as he circled back to come into the stage road well below the basin.

Five minutes later he checked the bay at the edge of the lower spring and waited while the horse thrust his warm nose into the water. The sound of hoofs brought Trumbaugh to the doorway, a Winchester in his arms. The sight of Morgan stopped him dead. After a moment he waved a hand in wordless greeting, then reached inside to set the rifle down. Then he stepped outside, closed the door behind him, and put his shoulders against it.

"Now that's odd," mused Scott. "You'd think he was trying to hide something. This begins to look interesting."

When the horse had watered, Scott reined him over to the road house and drew up in front of Trumbaugh.

He looked down at the station agent, his eyes mild and guileless, ignoring the big man's coolly inhospitable glance.

"'Lo, Oscar. How's tricks?"

"Afternoon, Sheriff. Looking for someone?" His tone was wary.

"Just riding, Oscar, just riding," said Scott, and thought he caught a quick expression of relief in Trumbaugh's face. Scott glanced up at the sun, now low in the west, then brought his gaze back to the man blocking the doorway. "Seems as if it's later than I thought, Oscar. How about some grub before I push on?"

And now Scott noted that, though the early evening air was fresh and cool, Trumbaugh's forehead was beaded with perspiration. Even as the man's thick lips opened, Scott heard the faint squeak of floorboards. Trumbaugh spoke hastily, lifting his voice.

"Why sure, Morgan. Al's gone right now, but the coffee pot's on the stove and I reckon I can scare up something."

YET his small, pig-like eyes, full of sly calculation, gave the lie to the friendly tone of his words. He waited while Scott swung down, loosened the cinches, and looped the reins over the trail. Only then did Trumbaugh shove open the door and lead the way into the front room. Once inside, Scott pushed the door closed with his boot, his right hand not far from his gun butt, his eyes swiftly covering the interior.

The room was meagerly furnished, with a rough pine table, a sheet iron stove against the back wall, and three or four chairs. A half-emptied bottle of whisky, glasses, and cards were scattered over the table top, and cigarette stubs littered the dusty board floor. In the east wall were two closed doors. The front room was Trumbaugh's bedroom and the other, Scott recalled, held several bunks used by occasional late travelers.

Scott pulled one of the chairs over against the front wall, and sat down where he could keep both the station agent and the two closed doors within his vision. Trumbaugh busied himself beside the stove, keeping up a running fire of conversation, asking questions and offering comemnts about the murders, the stage holdup, and anything else that occurred to him.

Scott's eyes sharpened. Although Trumbaugh could never be accused of being close-mouthed, Scott had never known the big man to be this talkative. There was no doubt about it—he was covering up for someone, someone who was hiding behind one of those doors, who did not want to be seen.

Scott's fingers spun a cigarette into shape. He struck a match, studying Trumbaugh over the flame. And once again his ear caught the faint though unmistakable creak of floorboards from the rear room.

At the sound, Trumbaugh jumped and shot a furtive glance toward the closed door. His eyes slanted around to Morgan. But the latter was innocently looking at the tip of his cigarette, and Trumbaugh turned back.

Scott came to his feet and moved idly over to the front corner of the room, against the partition. He took a last deep drag on his cigarette, then ground the stub under his boot heel.

"Oscar," he said mildly, "did you know a

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man can be put in jail for hiding a criminal?"

For a long five seconds there was no sound, no movement. Suddenly Scott's words registered with Trumbaugh and he swung around, his face paling.

"What do you mean, Morgan?" There was a hoarse rasp in his voice, and he put up a hand to wipe perspiration from his brow.

"You know what I mean, Oscar. Who's in the back room?" On the heel of his words, Scott reached down and lifted the .45 from his holster. "Better tell your friend to shuck his hardware and come out with his hands up."

Trumbaugh's eyes came wider open in fright. He looked at the gun, uttered a half-hearted laugh, and blustered, "What's you pulling a gun on me for? There's nobody in there. That noise you heard must have been a rat."

Scott drew back the hammer of the .45; the click of its coming to full cock plain in the stillness. "Where do you want this slug, Oscar?"

Trumbaugh backed up a step, licking his dry lips. "I told you there's nobody back there. Don't you believe me?"

Scott titlted the gun barrel a fraction and let the hammer drop. The bullet clipped the tip of Trumbaugh's right ear, then slapped into the log wall. Trumbaugh let out a startled yelp and clapped a hand to his bleeding ear.

"I'll put the next one closer, Oscar."

Trumbaugh's face went gray. Hate was strong in his sunken eyes, but his fear was stronger than his hate. There was something in Scott's merciless gaze that told him the sheriff meant exactly what he said. He licked his lips again, finaly shrugged, and raised his voice.

"All right, Bert, he's got us. Better do what he says."

"You, Bert," rapped Scott. "Let me hear that gun hit the floor, and come out with your hands up. Don't try any tricks. Oscar, I don't see any gun on you, but turn and face the back wall and keep those hands up."

Sullenly Trumbaugh obeyed the order, and for a long ten seconds there was silence. Then, from behind the partition, there came a metallic clatter. The knob turned, the door swung wide, and a burly individual stepped slowly into the room. His right hand was level with his head, but his left shoulder was heavily bandaged, and that arm hung loosely at his side. Even before his feet cleared the doorway, the newcomer spoke hurriedly.

"Don't shoot. I can't raise my left arm. My gun's in the other room."

"Well, well. Look who we have here." Scott ran cool eyes over the wounded man. "What's the rest of your name, Bert?"

But the few seconds had given Bert a new hold on his assurance. "What's the idea?" he scowled. "You got nothing on me."

Scott teetered gently on his heels, his leveled gun trained midway between Bert and Trumbaugh.

The latter was still facing the wall, hands hugging his ears.

"Who shot you, Bert? Is that my bullet in your shoulder?" he hazarded, and knew instantly from the burly man's slight start that he had guessed right.

Bert's eyes darkened, and he took a quick step toward the sheriff. "Damn you, Morgan. You won't—" He stopped short as the Colt rocked into line with his chest. He cursed thinly.

"You won't get away with this. Wait till D—" He caught himself, and his jaws clamped tight.

"Go right ahead. Wait till what?"

But Bert was through talking, and Scott received only another scowl. "All right, Bert," he said, "if that's the way you want it. Maybe you and Oscar will talk better in jail. Now turn around. And don't get taken with any sudden notions—this gun goes off mighty easy."

He searched Bert carefully, waved him over beside Trumbaugh, then went over the latter in the same way. Taking some rope from a pile in the corner, in a few minutes he had both men tied hand and foot and seated beside the end wall. Scott stepped back then and ran an approving eye over his handiwork.

"Now, if you gents don't mind, I'll sample that grub Oscar was fixing. Sure you won't join me?"

But the two shook their heads, uneasy and sullen.

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SCOTT was draining his second cup of coffee when a sudden sound jerked his head toward the front. Listening, he caught the low yet steady thud of a horse's hoofs on the road leading down from the pass. Picking up his gun from the table, he swung to face his prisoners.

"You expecting anybody, Oscar?"

Trumbaugh scowled and shook his head, but there was a gleam in his eye that sent Scott quickly over beside the front window to peer out through the dusty glass. Twilight was deepening, blurring the far edges of the thick timber enclosing the basin. Scott fixed his gaze on the spot where the road cut a narrow swath through the trees and ran out into the open.

The thudding hoofs drew closer, and suddenly a horse and rider loomed out of the shadows, then was checked momentarily as if the rider were scanning the cabin and its surroundings. Then he came on, his horse scenting water and now at a trot. The man's features were indistinct in the fading light, but there was no mistaking those long arms and massive shoulders. They could only belong to one man—Dutch Dorman!

Swiftly Scott moved back across the room. "Oscar," he warned, "if you or Bert let out a peep, I'll belt you one." He made a threatening gesture with his Colt. Trumbaugh looked up slyly, but kept his mouth closed.

Hoofs thudded nearer, came to a stop. There was a faint squeak of saddle leather, and Dutch's harsh voice called, "Hey, Oscar!"

With the words, the station agent heaved his body to the side and yelled, "Look out, Dutch! It's—"

The cry was abruptly cut off in Trumbaugh's throat as Scott's gun barrel crashed down on the big man's head. Trumbaugh uttered a short grunt and toppled sideways to the floor. Outside, there was a startled curse, saddle leather creaked again, and a horse's hoofs thundered on the hard-packed ground.

By the time Scott hit the yard, horse and rider had almost reached the cover of the trees. Scott triggered off a short, but by then the darkness had swallowed them up. Gun in hand, he listened to Dutch's horse pound through the timber to the southwest. He's heading for Decker's Scott thought, which meant only one thing. Scott couldn't remain here much longer without risking being cut off from town by Dutch or Sanderson or some of Decker's men. It wouldn't take Dutch long to reach the Rocking R.

Hurriedly Scott threw open the Colt's loading gate, punched out the empty schells, and shoved in fresh loads. Holstering the gun, he stepped to the corral, saddled two horses, and tied them beside his own bay. When he reentered the dusk-filled cabin, Oscar Trumbaugh was just struggling up to a sitting position against the wall. Blood trickled from a long gash on his head.

Scott continued into the back room, where he picked up Bert's .45 from the floor and stuck it in his waistband. Grabbing a knife from the table, he severed the cords holding his prisoners' feet, then gestured with his gun toward the door.

"On your way," he ordered crisply. "Better be good, Oscar. Next time I'll use a bullet."

He hoisted the two men into their saddles, tied their feet to the cinch rings, and lashed their bound hands to their saddle horns. Looping the reins up, he ran a line back from each man to his own saddle.

"Ride ahead of me," he commanded, "and keep those horses at a steady trot. If either of you try lagging behind, I'll drag you to Sentinel at the end of the rope. Now move."

Trumbaugh laughed harshly. "You'll never get there."

"You'd better hope I do, Oscar," Scott told him coldly, "because if I don't, neither of you'll be alive to tell about it. Get going."

He let the horses stretch out into a quick run on the downgrade out of Twin Springs, but soon pulled them in to a fast trot and held them at this distance-eating gait. By the time they started down the long slope into the basin, the last faint light had gone out of the sky and stars were beginning to glitter against the dark blue.

Barely an hour later, with the moon lifting above the eastern rim, they splashed into the shallow waters of Badger Creek, north of the stage station, and waited for their horses to drink sparingly before pushing on. Scott had deliberately swung wide of the station, since its small bar was the frequent hangout of Rocking R punchers.

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They came back to the road well beyond the station, and Scott held the horses to the side, where the sod deadened the hoofbeats. They topped out on a long ridge, and Scott took advantage of the moon's silvery light to scan their back trail. But he could neither hear nor see anything; the night was still. Nevertheless, in spite of his prisoners' cursing protests, he urged the horses to a faster pace.

Swiftly the miles fell away, and with each passing mile some of the tension eased out of Scott. Then, as he was beginning to relax, his ear picked up sounds behind them. Down the wind there came the heavy thudding of hoofs. They were on his trail, and coming fast.

Scott bent forward in the saddle and lifted the horses to a run. They thundered down a slope and ran into the narrow mouth of a canyon, the beat of their horses' feet rebounding from the sheer rock walls in echoing waves of sound. Trumbaugh's sorrel began to lose ground.

Scott lashed the horse across the rump. "Keep him up, Oscar."

The big man ripped out a curse. "You'll never make it, Morgan. They're coming up." But he pulled the horse ahead.

THE pace was punishing, and the horses were beginning to breathe hard, tiring from the long run. The sound of pursuit rolled out strongly. They passed from the hills into the broad valley of Wind River, and swept around the base of Squaw Peak. Then the lights of Sentinel winked out ahead.

A moment later a sixgun began to rock the night. A second and then a third joined in, and gun flame reddened the shadows behind them. The range was still long for accurate six-gun shooting, yet close enough so that Scott caught the whiplash of a bullet, not three feet away. A second shot plucked sharply at his hat brim.

Above the thudding of hoofs and the roar of guns he heard Dutch's voice raise. "Rush 'em, boys! We got 'em now!"

A bullet came flying close above Trumbaugh, and Oscar let out a quick yell of alarm. "Watch your fire, Dutch!"

Scott yanked Bert's gun from his waistband and twisted half around. He glimpsed the shadowy outlines of three riders, fanned out and coming on at a dead run. He emptied the gun at them, then dropped it to draw his own Colt from holster. There were high-pitched shouts behind, and gun flame whipped back at him. Dust spurted up all around the fleeing riders.

Swiftly Scott triggered off a pair of shots, and the leading horse screamed and went down, pitching its rider into the road. But the other two still came on, throwing lead. Scott felt a bullet fan by him, heard a sodden thud and a choked grunt from Trumbaugh. Risking a quick glance at the station agent, he saw him sway drunkenly in the saddle.

He swiveled around and loosed another shot at the oncoming riders. One of them let out a yell and rocked in his saddle. Scott threw another bullet back down the road. It was too much for them, and they wavered, then wheeled back up the valley, one of them slumped low over the saddle horn. Scott sent a final shot after them to hasten their going, then pulled the blowing horses down to a walk.

That had been close, he thought, too damn close. Ahead of him Trumbaugh reeled, and Scott brought his horse up alongside. As he did so, the big man sagged limply, as the life ran out of him. He was held in the saddle only by the cords binding his hands and ankles.

SCOTT MORGAN halted abruptly before the Elite Restaurant. For a second he thought he had stopped before the wrong building. The big front window he remembered as being dirty and fly-specked was now bright and sparkling, and its lower half was covered with crisp, ruffled curtains. Inside, he glimpsed checked red-and-white tablecloths on the half-dozen round tables. Shaking his head in wonderment, he turned into the restaurant.

Nan Austin had her back to the door, arranging a pile of dishes on a shelf, but she swung about when she heard the door close. When she saw who it was, a pleased expression came in her eyes. Scott swept off his hat and stopped in front of her, a slow smile breaking over his face.

"I hoped you'd be in, Scott," she said. "Jim's been telling me about the trouble you had, but I just couldn't believe him."

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He looked beyond the girl at Jim Cannon, seated at the long counter, a grin on his freckled face. Scott's glance came back to the girl.

"You have brains as well as beauty. Not believing everything he says shows your good sense." Scott watched her smile come, and went on, "Now that you mention it, seems I did have a little argument with a couple of people."

But she wouldn't be put off that lightly. She poked a finger through a jagged tear in his hat brim. "I'd say that was a pretty strong argument," she said. Her eyes were on his face, wide with concern.

It was a pleasant feeling to have this grave-eyed girl worrying about him. He drew a long breath, letting his glance absorb the picture she made. Her mouth was full and generous, but when she smiled it did something to her face and her clear, gray-green eyes that made her beautiful. He liked everything about this girl.

"How about some ham and eggs for a hungry man?" he asked smilingly.

The girl flushed, her red lips curving in dismay. "I'm sorry, Scott. I might have known you wanted breakfast. I'll have it ready in a minute."

She turned and stepped beyond a partition to the small kitchen at the back, and Scott straddled a stool beside his deputy.

"I thought you'd gotten lost," said Jim. "What took you so long?"

"Had a look at our guest, but he doesn't seem to want to talk. Better take him something to eat when you go back."

Jim nodded. "It's ordered. It should be about ready."

Scott leaned both elbows on the oilcloth-covered counter and said, "One of us had better stick close long as Bert's in there. I'd hate to lose him. If he'll talk, he should be able to tell us a lot. I'm dead certain he was in on the holdup. Oscar was mixed up in it, too, but he can't talk now, worse luck. I don't think it would've taken much pressure to make him spill. Now we'll have to go to work on Bert."

"You were lucky last night," said Jim, with a worried frown. "You should have let me go with you."

Nan came from the kitchen, placed several platters in front of Scott, poured him a cup of coffee, and said, "There, that should do you."

"How about me?" Jim complained. "Don't I get any more coffee?"

"I've just the thing for you," she told him, and her eyes were twinkling as she stepped behind the partition. In a moment she was back with a tray of food. "There you are. Better hurry before it gets cold. I wouldn't want any complaints, my first day in business."

Shaking his head, Jim slowly stood up. "I like that," he said. "She keeps me here, plying me with coffee, just so I can tell her all about you. Then as soon's you come in she shows me the door."

The color in Nan Austin's cheeks deepened, but Scott smiled broadly. "Go find your own girl. I saw this one first."

Jim sighed and picked up the tray. "Reckon I know when I'm not wanted. But don't worry, Nan. I'll be back." He waved and went out.

Nan stood back from the counter, watching Scott. The food was plentiful and good, and he ate silently, with the complete absorption of a hungry man. Finally satisfied, he shoved the platters away and lit a cigarette. Nan poured him another cup of coffee. Scott braced an elbow on the counter, chin propped in a big hand, and looked up at the girl.

"You're a pretty fair cook, Nan," he said. "Any time you want a recommendation, just send them to me."

He watched the sparkle come into her eyes, but before she could say anything another customer came in and she was busy. Scott knew he should get back to the office, but for several minutes he held his place, finding a feeling of ease and relaxation in Nan Austin's presence. Idly his eyes followed her as she waited on the customer.

Steps sounded on the boardwalk, and he glanced up to see Stacy Blackwell's tall figure entering the door. The banker's gimlet eyes ran quickly around the room and spotted Morgan. He came over to take the adjoining seat, his thin-lipped mouth curving in a tight smile.

"Good morning, Morgan. You're the man I wanted to see."

Scott returned the greeting, then said,

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"What can I do for you?"

Just then Nan Austin stopped in front of Blackwell, and the banker rose to his feet and removed his hat. "Good morning, Miss Austin," he said. "I must say you've done wonders with the Elite. I hardly recognized the place. You can well be proud of it, as I know Sentinel is proud to have such a charming person as yourself as one of its citizens."

UNDER the direct stare of Blackwell's sharp eyes, Nan flushed, thanked him, then waited for his order. Not until she had disappeared behind the partition did Blackwell resume his seat. The banker's smooth, polished manner, a certain smugness about him, his evident arrogance, all brought a faint resentment to Scott. His tone was brusque as he repeated his question.

"What was it you wanted to see me about?"

Stacey Blackell tipped his hawk-like head toward the sheriff, and his shoulders lifted in a barely perceptible shrug. "I suppose it's nothing, Morgan, only I wondered what all the shooting was, out near Squaw Peak last night. I'd just gone to bed at the time. When I rode in this morning, I thought I'd find one or two bodies, but there wasn't a thing. Had you heard anything about it?"

Scott drew deeply on his cigarette, regarding Blackwell through the smoke. He recalled that Blackwell had a small cabin on a mining claim on the western slope of Squaw Peak, where the banker spent a large part of his time, coming to town only to take care of such matters as his head cashier couldn't handle.

"Reckon so," Scott answered. "I was bringing in a couple of the men that were in on the stage holdup, when some of their friends tried to rescue them. They plugged one of my prisoners before I scared them off."

"Who were you bringing in?"

"Oscar Trumbaugh and a fellow named Bert. Oscar was the one who took a slug in the back."

Scott's eyes were on the cigarette he was stubbing out in his plate, and he missed Blackwell's quick start of surprise, as quickly suppressed. When his glance came back to Blackwell, there was a look of astonishment on the banker's face.

"Trumbaugh? I always thought he was an honest, hard-working man."

Scott nodded. "That's what I thought, until yesterday."

Stacey Blackwell looked at the sheriff, a frown coming to his face. "Who were the men chasing you, Morgan?"

For a reason Scott couldn't put a finger on, he hedged, avoiding a direct answer. "It was too dark to tell. Might have been anybody."

"Anything more on the killing of Warner and Spellman?"

"Not a thing."

"But surely you must have something to gon on?" the banker persisted.

An instinctive wariness made Scott wonder what was behind the questions. They definitely did not fit in with what he knew of the man. Blackwell was a relative newcomer to Sentinel, having arrived only five years earlier. He had bought into the Rock County Bank, had gained control of it within a year, and was now a leading citizen in the community.

"That's one of the questions I can't answer yet," Scott finally said. "I've got some suspicions, but I can't say anything until I do some checking."

Anger smouldered briefly in Blackwell's dark eyes, but it was gone so quickly that Scott was not quite certain it had ever been there. After a moment the banker nodded his head, slowly, almost reluctantly.

"Maybe you're right in keeping it to yourself. But what about your prisoner? What did you call him—Bert?" At Scott's nod, Blackwell went on, "Have you been able to get any information out of him?"

Scott shook his head, and rose as Nan Austin placed Blackwell's order in front of him. "He hasn't said a thing, so far. It's time I was getting back to see if I can reason with him." He nodded to the banker, and said to the girl, "See you later, Nan."

He was stepping through the doorway when he caught the banker's rich and mellow voice. "This is excellent food, Miss Austin. I see that I shall have to spend more of my time in town from now on."

Blackwell's smooth voice faded out, and for some reason Scott was frowning as he headed toward the courthouse. He was passing the Mercantile when he remembered he

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needed .45 shells. Head down, still thinking about Blackwell and Nan Austin, he went through the doorway and collided violently with a young woman on her way out, her arms loaded with packages. Only Scott's outstretched arm held her upright. He found himself looking down into Jane Warner's laughing brown eyes.

"Scott Morgan! Is that any way to greet me?"

Humor flashed in his eyes. "Reckon the least I can do is give you a hand," he said, as a couple of the packages fell to the floor. "Where's the buckboard?"

She laughed musically. "There isn't any. I'm staying at the hotel." At his sideward look she added, "It got too lonesome out there, Scott, so Hattie and I moved in last night."

Sober-faced, he said, "I knew you'd get out of that supper invitation."

"Silly!" She laughed again. "Just for that you can take me to supper tonight."

"I'll be there," he told her with a grin.

WHAT did you find out about Decker?"

Jim Cannon looked up from the newspaper as Scott sat down behind his desk. "He was at the Rocking R," Jim said. "He went out late the day before, and didn't get back till the night of the murders."

"That ties him in, then. What about the office—did you find anything?"

Jim laid the paper down and spread his hands in disgust. "Couldn't find a damn thing wrong. Maybe you'd better have a look."

Scott said musingly, "I'd like to know what they were after. It must be important, to risk breaking in here. If they got it, we'll never know what it was. Our only chance is that they couldn't find it. All right, Jim, I'll see what I can turn up."

For the next fifteen minutes the silence of the office was broken only by the soft rustle of papers and the squeaking of sliding drawers. Jim slumped slow in his chair, thumbs in his belt, and watched. Finally Scott shrugged, shoved a last stack of reward dodgers into an empty pigeonhole, and stood up.

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He cursed thinly. Then, savagely, impatiently, he slammed the roll top desk. The wood crashed down and a long slip of white pepper, dislodged from its resting place behind the lid, fluttered slowly to the floor.

"What the hell!" Jim uncoiled himself and stooped over to pick up the object.

"Where'd that come from?"

"Looks like it was stuck under the lid," said Jim, turning the paper over. "It's only an empty envelope. This couldn't be what they were after." He started to toss it away, when Scott's voice stayed his hand.

"Let's have it, Jim. You never can tell."

The deputy gave him a surprised glance, but passed it across, then lowered his lanky frame into his chair. Scott took the envelope and looked it over. Jim had been right. It was just a long, empty envelope, addressed in a bold hand to the Sheriff, Rocky County, Sentinel, Colorado.

Then he caught sight of several lines of printing on the back. He brought it closer and read, "Return to District Attorney's Office, Silverbell, Texas." His eyes narrowed, and he gave the envelope a second, more thorough examination. Almost instantly he noted that the paepr was clean, its smooth, shiny surface unwrinkled, and the ink was bright and fresh looking. He whistled softly, his eyes thoughtful.

Jim raised an inquisitive eyebrow. "What's up, Scott?"

"Maybe nothing, maybe a lot," was the non-committal answer.

Scott turned to the rear wall, and ran his eye swiftly over the score or more reward notices tacked up beside the door. Then he turned back to face his deputy. "Jim, why does a district attorney write to a sheriff's office?"

Jim's look was blank. "To ask 'em to keep an eye out for somebody they want real bad. We get 'em all the time."

Scott nodded, and resumed his seat. "That must be the answer."

The tone of his voice made Jim say, "The answer to what?"

Scott nodded his head again. "It's the only reason I can think of," he said. Then, after a moment, he added, "Jim, do you see what I see?"

"I don't see a damn thing. What are you driving at?"

Scott rested his elbows on the desk. "Here's a district attorney in—" he paused to glance down at the envelope—"in Silverbell, Texas, sending us a letter. As you said, the only thing he could've been sending would be a reward dodger, or maybe an inquiry about somebody, which is the same thing. From the looks of this envelope, it must've come in within the last week.

"Tom always called them to our attention as soon's they got here, and put them up on the wall there, taking down the oldest to make room. Yet there aren't any up there now from Texas—which means he didn't put it up. I don't remember his saying anything about it, either, do you?"

Jim shook his head soberly. Scott's fingers busied themselves in the construction of a cigarette. He struck a match, drew smoke deep.

Tossing the tobacco sack into Jim's outstretched hand, he continued, "My guess is that Tom got that letter the morning he was killed. You remember that he and the judge were looking at the mail when we came back from breakfast, and they quit talking as soon's we came in. What else could that mean? And the description in that letter must've sounded like someone here in town.

"You know how both Tom and the judge were. They'd go a mile out of their way to help anyone; they were that kind of men. Well, I'd gamble that that description came mighty close to fitting someone they knew—Gene Decker, maybe. It'd be just like them to try to clear it up right away, hoping they could be wrong or that it could be explained."

He paused to look down at the envelope. When his eyes lifted, there was a bleak look in them.

"But they didn't know they were going up against a cold-blooded killer whose only idea was to protect himself."

Jim whistled. "Damned if that doesn't sound right. And then the killer busted in here to see if Tom had left anything behind that would tie him in."

"That's probably it," said Scott. "He missed the envelope only because it had fallen behind the lid."

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JIM had another thought. "But how'd the killer know Tom hadn't told you or me about it?"

"I reckon Tom told him first thing that nobody but he and the judge knew about it. That'd be Tom's way."

"But how are you going to prove it?"

"Maybe with this envelope. I'll get off a letter to this district attorney, asking him to send us another copy of whatever he sent before."

An awed look touched Jim's eyes. "That ought to do the trick."

"Maybe so," Scott said. "Let's hope I'm right. But we still need evidence that'll link him directly to the killings. That's going to be our job now." He hesitated, and ground out his cigarette stub. "What about our friend Bert? Has he said anything yet?"

"He hasn't opened his mouth except to eat."

"Keep after him, but my guess is he won't talk. He knows Decker can't afford to let him go to trial, and will try to break him out. So keep an eye on him." Scott got up, and crossed to lift his hat from its peg. "You stick here. I'm going to have a talk with Decker."

"What do you want to see him for?"

"To ask him about Bert and Dutch."

"He's not going to tell you anything."

"I don't expect him to," said Scott. "But there's always the chance he might give something away without knowing it, and we need information."

Jim only shook his head gloomily. "Watch yourself, Scott."

"Don't worry about me. Keep after Bert."

Scott was still grinning when he pushed through the Elkhorn's swing doors. The long room was empty except for a lone man, his back to the doorway, playing solitaire at one of the back tables, and Whitey, the bartender, lazily polishing glasses near the front.

Scott nodded to the latter, and said, "Is Gene in his office?"

At Whitney's answering nod, Scott walked toward the back of the room. The solitaire player laid down another card, then looked around. It was Lew Hackett, and at the sight of Scott he jerked perceptibly. His

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face tightened and he started to get up, but Scott put a hand on his shoulder and shoved him down in his chair hard.

"I didn't ask for you, Lew. Stay put."

He continued unhurriedly to the rear door, and opened it without knocking. Gene Decker stood at a side window, a cigar in his mouth. At the sound of the door he wheeled about, a look of quick irritation crossing his face. When he saw his visitor, the irritation was almost immediately replaced by a guarded alertness. Yet none of this was reflected in his hearty greeting.

"Have a seat, Scott. What's on your mind?" He sat down behind his desk, a smile on his heavy lips. There was no smile in his cold eyes.

Scott nodded to Decker and closed the door. "I'm after some information," he said evenly.

Decker settled back in his chair and favored him with a direct stare. Something he thought he saw in the sheriff's eyes made him suddenly wary.

"What about?" he asked, after a moment.

"Reckon you heard about last night's ruckus." Scott's tone was dry. Decker's eyes narrowed. He nodded, but said nothing.

"Then where's your friend, Dutch Dorman?"

The unexpected question caught Gene Decker by surprise, and briefly his face showed it. Then it became expressionless, and his voice held only a puzzled note as he said, "Why? What's he got to do with that?"

Scott ignored the question. "Have you seen him?"

Decker shook his head slowly, almost regretfully. "No, I haven't."

Scott was watching the saloon owner's face. But other than the faintest flicker of the man's pale eyes, he could read nothing there. Yet somehow the statement lacked conviction, and Scott was sure Decker was lying.

"When you see him, give him a message from me."

"What's that?" Under his clipped mustache, Decker's mouth was ironical.

"Tell him to stay out of town if he wants to keep out of jail."

Decker's eyes came wide open. "What do you mean by that?"

"You know what I mean," snapped Scott. "Dutch tried to take Oscar and Bert away from me last night, and Dutch killed Oscar." Irony came into Scott's voice. "Which, I reckon, was a mistake, as he was gunning for me. But all the same, if Dutch shows up, he'll stand trial and hang for murder."

"Can you prove that?" Decker had regained his composure.

"You're damn right I can. I both saw and heard him. And don't try giving him an alibi, like you did Buck Clayton. Look what happened to Buck. He made a mistake in judgment, and he's dead. Think it over, Gene."

The impact of his words brought a stain of anger to Decker's face. Momentarily he went tense. Then he moved his shoulders slightly, and looked up at Scott with well-assumed-bewilderment.

"You've got me wrong, Morgan," he said smoothly. "I still don't know what this is all about. If what you say about Dutch is true, he's probably left the country. I don't think he'll show up in town." Decker's eyes rested on Scott, a faint, mocking smile touching his lips.

For a long minute Scott stared steadily at Decker. Then he said, "At least not in the daytime." He turned to the door and opened it, then glanced back, his voice a sardonic drawl. "You're smart, Gene, smarter than I thought. But sometimes it doesn't pay to be too smart."

Without waiting for a reply, he wheeled and closed the door behind him.

MIKE TROUT'S Frontier was fairly well filled late that evening, when Scott Morgan and Ned Quinn shouldered through the batwings. Mike Trout himself, a short, paunchy man with a merry eye, was behind the bar, and greeted them cordially. Scott got a bottle and two glasses, then proceeded with Quinn past a group of card players to a table in the back. They sat down, and Scott poured two short drinks. He lifted his glass and looked across the rim at his chief deputy.

"Here's to luck in your new job, Ned."

"Damned if it doesn't look as if I'll need it," returned Ned soberly.

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TROUBLE RANGE

Scott put his empty glass down and stretched out his long legs. Ned Quinn leaned back in his chair, his twinkling eyes roaming over the saloon's bright interior. He took a cigar from his pocket and lit it.

"Too bad Jim can't be here," he said.

Scott shook his head. "We can't afford to have anything happen to Bert. From now on Jim'll have to stick close, because I want you to circulate around the basin. Keep your eyes open, but mainly check on the Rocking R. And watch out for Dutch. I'm dead certain he's still here. And you and I are the only ones who know him by sight. So keep under cover."

Quinn nodded, and Scott went on, "The hell of being a sheriff, Ned, is that we've got to go slow in everything we do. We could throw Decker and Hackett in jail, and chances are we'd never have any more trouble. But we couldn't hold 'em without proof. They'd be out in no time, laughing at us."

He slacked lower in his seat. Idly he poked his glass around in a circle with his finger.

Suddenly, booming into the night's stillness, came the muffled, rocking blast of a single gunshot. It overrode the murmur of voices, stopped the shuffling of cards and the clink of glasses. The pound of the explosion had not yet died before Scott leaped hurriedly to his feet, overturning his chair.

"That sounded like it came from the courthouse. C'mon."

He lunged for the door, Ned at his heels. They burst through the batwings, ducked under the hitch rack, and headed across the street on the run, jerking their guns from leather as they went. Behind them, the doors of the Frontier banged, and a shout sounded from upstreet.

Quinn aimed for the mouth of the alley along the side of the courthouse, where Jim had been left on guard, while Scott dashed headlong into the building, a strong foreboding in him. Hastily he shoved into the office, swore heartily as his first match broke, touched a second to a lantern, and unlocked the outer cell door. From the street came the sound of voices and the stamping of boots.

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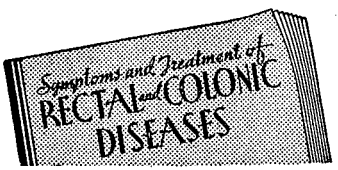

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down the corridor ahead of him. And now the acrid tang of powder smoke hit his nostrils, and his stride lengthened. He stopped in front of the last cell, lantern held high as he peered through the bars. He could see a figure stretched out flat on the floor, directly beneath the window. The yellow light caught the dark shine of blood staining the boards beside the motionless head.

Mechanically Scott returned his gun to its holster, and as mechanically unlocked the door and walked forward. One swift look was enough. Bert was dead, he would never talk now. A bullet fired at close range through the window had, in one swift stroke, wiped out all chance of pinning anything directly on Gene Decker. Scott cursed softly, bitterly.

The corridor began to fill; men jammed its narrow confines and overflowed into the cell. Suddenly Scott became aware of the growing murmur of voices floating in through the window overhead. What had happened to Jim?

He pivoted and shot a swift look at the ring of sober faces, their eyes riveted on the body at his feet. Almost instantly he sighted the two he wanted, the tall, lean Sam Dixon, and beside him the shorter figure of Dr. Doolittle.

"More business for you, Sam," he said grimly. "Take care of him, will you?" The undertaker nodded, and Scott handed him the lantern and turned to Doolite. "Come on, Doc. There's nothing you can do here, but there may be, outside."

At the far end of the alley a lantern shone in the midst of a circle of shadowy figures, and Scott and Doolittle forced a path to the front and looked down. Jim Cannon lay sprawled on his back, arms above his head, one of them still clutching his gun. Ned Quinn had Jim's head propped up, and was tilting a flask of whiskey to his mouth. Jim gagged and groaned weakly. His eyes flickered, then slowly opened.

"Wha-what hit me?" He moved his head, and winced at the stab of pain.

Doolittle bent over, his sensitive hands gently probing Jim's head. After a moment he straightened, nodding at Scott's glance.

"Just a nasty crack. He'll have a headache for a few days, that's all."

With the aid of Ned's arm, Jim pulled himself to his feet.

"What happened?" Scott asked him.

"I don't know, Scott. I was standing by the street, and thought I heard something back here. I couldn't see anything, so I stuck my head around the corner, and—wham. The roof fell in, and I went out like a light." Recollection hit him. "What about Bert?"

"He's dead," Scott said shortly. "After knocking you out, somebody called Bert to the window and put a slug through his head."

Jim swore disgustedly, and a startled murmur ran through the crowd. Scott looked around.

Lew Hackett avoided the sheriff's sharp gaze, but Gene Decker's chalky eyes had a glint of amusement in them. With an effort, Scott held his temper in check. Although he was positive one of Decker's men, possibly Dutch, had shot Bert, he couldn't prove it. He shrugged and was turning away, when Decker's ironic voice halted him.

"Why don't you go after the killer, Morgan? Every minute you waste standing here lets him get that much further away."

Scott swung back. He did not attempt to hide the dislike in his eyes. "When I want your advice, Decker, I'll ask for it."

He thought for an instant that Decker would take up the blunt challenge. The blond man stiffened, his face like a harsh mask. A moment of stunned surprise greeted the words. Then Decker turned abruptly on a heel and, with Hackett at his side, roughly shoved through the crowd.

The gathering began to break up, and Scott stepped over where Ned was quartering back and forth across the alley, swinging a lantern along the ground.

Ned straightened with a curse and reported, "Not a sign, Scott. We won't find anything now, after so many people have been tramping up and down."

"I didn't think there would be, Ned. This was a slick job."

Scott was frowning. Decker had outsmarted him again, had murdered Scott's witness right under his nose. He would have to make a fresh start.

(To be continued in the next issue)

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OUR AIR MAIL

(Continued from page 7)

Lonely Widow

Dear Editor:

I am a lonely widow, 41 years old, 5'4½" tall, with blue eyes and brown hair. I am a stenographer and have a good job, but get tired of working all the time and would enjoy having someone to correspond with. I enjoy music, dancing, movies and also like to watch TV. Please write to me; I promise to answer all letters received.

RUTH A. HENTON
2410-B Fifth Terrace, North
Birmingham, Alabama

None But the Lonely Heart

Dear Editor:

Your Air Mail column is definitely a boon to the lonely heart, for letters can dissipate loneliness and boredom. I am 46 years old, 5'11" tall. My hobbies are sports, dancing and reading, and I also collect stamps. I'm willing to correspond with readers regardless of age or nationality.

SEYMOUR FOUNDER
P.O. Box 422
Bridgetown
Barbados,
British West Indies

Lonely Farmer

Dear Editor:

I enjoy reading your magazine, and I think "Our Air Mail" is wonderful. I am a lonely farmer of 33, with brown hair and eyes. My interests are hillbilly music and writing. Is there a lonely widow or single girl who would want to correspond with me?

VERNON L. GROVE
RR #1
Bruceville, Indiana

Way up in Alaska

Dear Editor:

I notice that you print letters from lonely people and, since I am stationed at a site in Alaska, I consider myself lonely. The nearest town is 50 miles away, and whenever it rains or snows the roads are blocked and we can't get into town. I would like to correspond with girls back in the States. I am 19, have black hair and gray eyes, am 5'9½" tall, and weigh 180 lbs. I like most sports, especially football.

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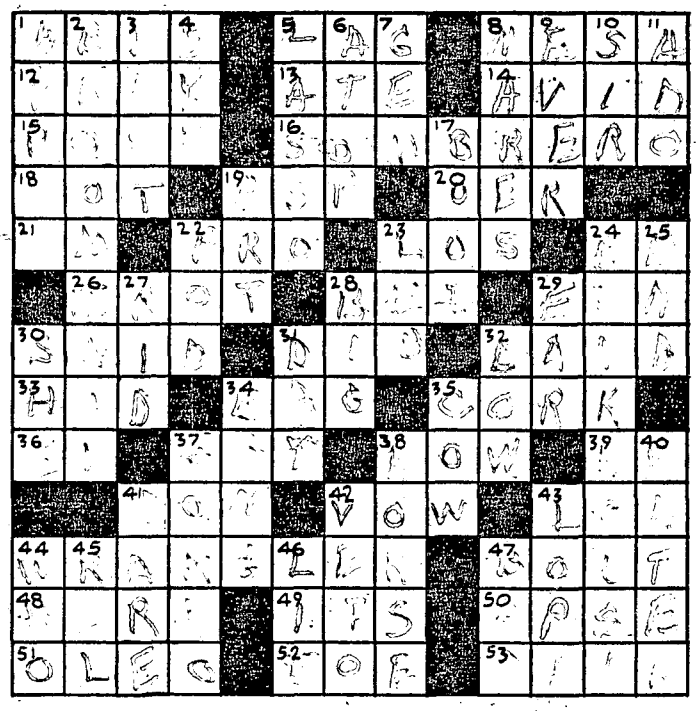
THE WESTERNERS' CROSSWORD PUZZLE



The solution of this puzzle will appear in the next issue

ACROSS

1 Capable
5 To loiter
8 Western plateau
12 To say prayers
13 Had lunch
14 Greedy
15 To sit for a picture
16 Southwestern hat
18 Plot of land
19 Poisonous snake
20 Over (contr.)
21 The letter M
22 Golf teacher
23 — Angeles, Cal.
24 To take place
26 Horse's gait
28 Wager
29 Amusement
30 Uttered
31 Accomplished
32 Ground
33 Concealed
34 Sack
35 Bottle stopper
36 — Paso, Texas
37 Food for horses
38 In what way
39 The man
41 Donald's nickname
42 Solemn promise
43 — Chaney, actor
44 Herdsman
47 Boxing contest
48 Group of cattle
49 Belonging to it
50 Part of a church
51 Butter substitute
52 Part of the foot
53 Game animal

DOWN

1 Pie fruit
2 Wild mare
3 Final
4 Sight organ
5 Lariat
6 Up above
7 Jewel
8 Female horses
9 Always
10 Knight's title
11 Commotion
17 Cowboy's shoe
19 Paintings
22 Seed container
23 Was in advance
24 Cowboys' sleeping quarters
25 Conclusion
27 Free (of)
28 Large
29 Distant
30 The girl
31 24 hours
32 Not high
34 To slam
35 Calf's mother
37 Lasso eyelet
38 Trigger is one
40 To come in
41 To challenge
42 President's "no"
43 To gallop slowly
44 Which person
45 Relative (abbr.)
46 Illuminated
47 Not good

B	R	O	N	C	O	■	R	O	D	E	O	S
R	E	F	I	L	L	■	U	N	A	B	L	E
A	S	■	P	A	D	■	N	E	D	■	I	N
N	O	D	■	M	E	S	A	■	■	A	V	A
D	R	U	M	■	R	O	W	S	■	G	E	T
S	T	E	E	R	■	P	A	P	O	O	S	E
■	■	■	S	O	S	■	Y	A	P	■	■	■
C	O	W	H	A	N	D	■	R	A	N	C	H
O	R	E	■	N	A	I	L	■	L	U	R	E
Y	E	T	■	■	R	E	A	L	■	T	A	R
O	G	■	A	P	E	■	S	E	A	■	D	D
T	O	I	L	E	R	■	S	A	D	D	L	E
E	N	T	E	R	S	■	O	P	E	N	E	D

Solution to puzzle in preceding issue

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WHAT DOES YOUR DAD DO?

How does your boy answer them?

Sure . . . you're his hero. You *know* that. But sometimes it can get kinda tough if the other kids don't seem to understand about the "old man."

It's not that you *like* to be chained to the same old job. Maybe you just *had* to leave school too soon. Maybe the war interfered. Anyway, here you are, stuck because you just don't have enough formal training.

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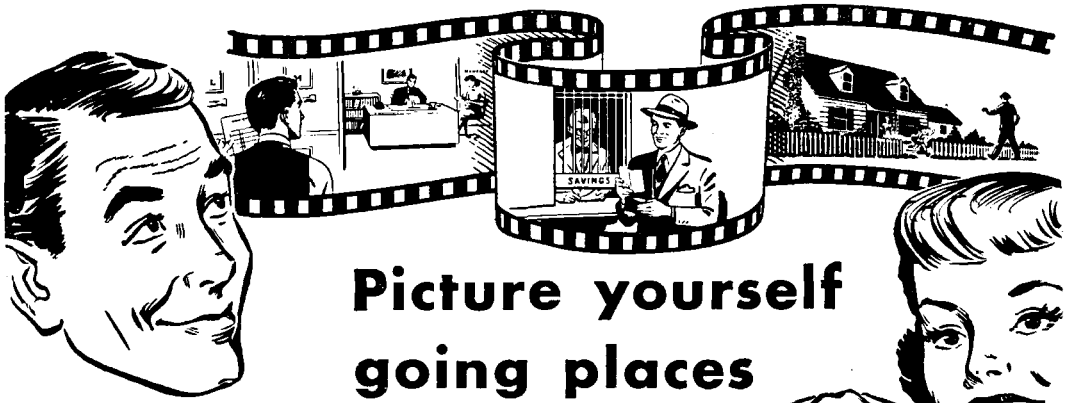

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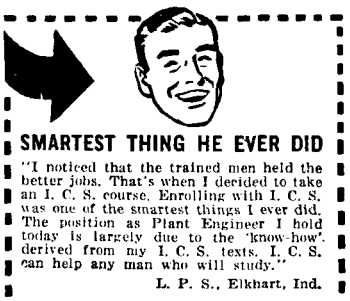

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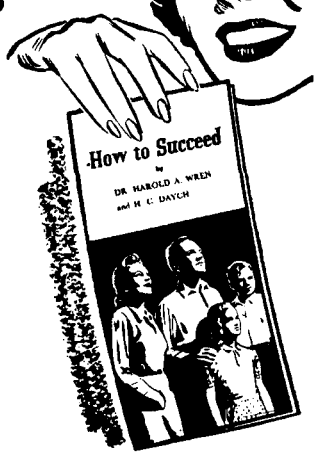

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